

## Social Conflict and Personal Suffering: Narrating a Mother's Experience in *Half Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir

<sup>1</sup>Zamin Ali, Central University of Gujarat.

<sup>2</sup>Longjam Loyangamba Meitei, Assistant Professor, Department of English, SGT University, Gurugram, Haryana 122-505, India.  
Email: [longjam\\_fhsl@sgtuniversity.org](mailto:longjam_fhsl@sgtuniversity.org)

### Abstract

*This article examines Shahnaz Bashir's The Half Mother as a literary articulation of social conflict and maternal suffering in conflict-ridden Kashmir. Focusing on the experiences of Haleema, the narrative foregrounds the trauma of enforced disappearance and its enduring psychological and emotional impact on women. The article situates personal grief within broader structures of militarisation, state violence, and socio-political repression, arguing that the novel transforms individual loss into a collective testimony of resistance and remembrance. Through close textual analysis, the study highlights how Bashir employs motherhood as a narrative strategy to humanise political conflict and expose silenced histories. The article underscores literature's role in documenting lived experiences that remain marginalised in official and political discourses.*

**Keywords:** Shahnaz Bashir; The Half Mother; Enforced Disappearance; Kashmir Conflict; Maternal Trauma

### Introduction

The objective of this article is to study the situation of Kashmiri half-mothers<sup>1</sup> in a conflict-ridden state and a male-dominated society through the lens of the novel *Half Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir. It tries to examine how these women were a part of the conflict in 1989, which was one of the worst years for the Kashmiri people. In this chapter, there is an attempt to show the tragic tale of one mother's fight for justice and search for her missing son. She fights for her son who has been apparently picked-up by the military forces as a suspect.

Haleema, the main character of the novel, exemplifies the condition of the mothers of Kashmir who lost their loved ones in the armed conflict. She lost her son and father in armed conflict. Consequently, she has to deal with both physical and mental trauma throughout her journey of life. She is left alone to fight her circumstances. She is hopeful till the end of her life to find her son but on not being able to do so, she joins the cause of reaching out to families experiencing the same fate. Despite being unsuccessful at every step, she never leaves hope. In the same vein she whispers to herself the following lines that indicate how hope is the only thing that allows her to move on and fight for her rights:

The greatest suffering brings the greatest hopes, the greatest miseries greatest patience, and the greatest uncertainties lead to the greatest quest. (Bashir 3)

The quest for her now is to locate her missing son and also to help others who are victims of the same circumstances. She uses these words to express her sorrow for losing her son and to recall the wonderful memories of her son in the past. She is pained internally that she no longer wanted to live. She had frequent dreams of her son Imran visiting their house. Every time she thinks of him, she dreams about him. Every time her determination to find her son

increased and she was convinced to get her son back. The memories of her son tore her apart every day and every night. She wondered if he was alive or dead, hungry or thirsty. She stopped caring for herself and her only purpose of life was to get her son back. She gave up both her physical and mental well-being to find him as she was focused on one and only cause. Haleema's love for her son forced her to sacrifice everything for the sake of her missing son.

Many women in Kashmir were facing similar horrendous experiences continuously and many other were in danger of being picked up and lifted at any moment. Those mothers, who had lost their loved ones, struggled day and night to get over their suffering but to no avail.

The author, Shahnaz Bashir was born on 30th July 1980 in Srinagar, Kashmir. He was honored with the gold medal in Mass Communication and Journalism from the University of Kashmir. He was also awarded the Shameem Ahmed Shameem Memorial *Kashmir Times* Award in 2007 for outshining in Media Studies. Currently, he is working as a teaching associate of Communication in the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Shahnaz Bashir is the author of award-winning books. He has written two novels, '*The Half Mother*' (2014), and '*Scattered Souls*' (2016). The half-mother novel is his maiden novel which was published in 2014 and won the Muse India-young writer's award. This novel has become very famous throughout the world.

The novel is about Haleema, who begins her life with hope like any other woman but to her misfortune, her entire life is spent struggling to fight against the system to search for her missing son. The novel explores the issue of involuntary disappearances in the Kashmir valley. It highlights the continuous psychological and physical trauma of those families whose members disappear in the custody of the Army. Haleema becomes an inspiration for all the mothers and half-widows in Kashmir.

### ***The Half Mother. A Mother's Journey***

The narrative of the novel revolves around three generations of the Joo family. Ghulam Rasool Joo; called AbJaan is the bread-earner of the family, primarily an old man. Haleema is a middle-aged woman, and her son represents youth. Haleema's trouble begins in her childhood itself due to poverty, hardship, and the demise of her mother. She was made to quit her education. At the age of eight, she loses her mother to tuberculosis. Her mother's demise pushes her out of school, and she is burdened with the responsibility of carrying out the household chores. Next in the series of hardship, Haleema's marriage to a clinical surgeon fails. She is AbJaan's lone daughter. After her marriage, her husband lived in her father's house. Unfortunately, the marriage ends within three months after she finds that her husband had an extra-marital relationship with another nurse in her husband's hospital. She is pained by this betrayal and gets a divorce from her husband. After her divorce, she gives birth to a son who brings meaning to her life after the disturbing separation from her husband. His name is Imran. Since he resembles his father more, these resemblances make Haleema disappointed. The mother gets very possessive about her son, Imran.

Overlooking the unmistakable likenesses between her son and her husband, Haleema intentionally refuses to accept this reality. After all, her son is a part of her life. Bashir writes about Haleema's possessiveness:

Ignoring the stark similarities between him and his father, Haleema passionately and desperately lied to herself. She dismissed the similitude and likened the boy to herself, declaring that he was a part of her being. ‘See, my dimples, my fingernails,’ she would readily offer while praising the baby before people could begin saying that he resembled his father. (Bashir 16)

Later an attack on Natipora takes an ugly turn in her life. The revolt starts after a political outburst which in turn upsets the life of the ordinary people of the valley. The entire valley begins thundering with the calls of rebellion and political emergency transforms it into a place that is known for mass annihilation. The era of the 90s breaks and upsets the existence of numerous innocent lives including Haleema’s family.

The second part of the novel tells us how a mother loses her son and how a mother’s life is turned around in a way that she had never imagined. The army captures her son and he is sent to jail. She tries everything to get the news of her son Imran. She looks all around the place for her son and hopes that Imran will be with her again. Her journey to visit many locations begins there. She is shocked to hear that the police are not able to register complaints about Army when she visits the police station. The police tell Haleema that the only way to get any information about her son is to approach the army directly. The family members in a desperate state approach the other security officer for help. They move to various interrogation centers inside and outside the state. Finally, with the progression of time, she is left with no more resources and is exhausted, waiting endlessly for the return of her son. This is what many families in the valley experienced. Haleema remains a victim and in her later years, she becomes an activist to find her son to fight for the cause of not just her son but of all the missing children.

The last part of the novel tells us about the random notes by one of the journalists. The writer narrates the conclusion of the story of Haleema through Izhar's notes. The writer describes how Izhar helped Haleema to publish news and the difficulties she faced visiting different places like Tihar jail, and Papa 2<sup>i</sup> torture centers. Izhar helps Haleema at every stage. He represents the challenges of journalism and how journalists contributed to the citizen’s life and struggle. Haleema is broken physically, mentally, and even financially but she continued her fight till her last breath. Her fight becomes a fight for justice for all those mothers who suffer the same fate as she does. The novel ends on a tragic note with a mother still waiting for her son as she dies without seeing the return of Imran. Before the collapse, she beckons her son “*Imran saeba? Aakha?*” Imran. Have you come?” (Bashir 178)

### ***Half Mother: An Imaginative Account of the Political Situation of Kashmir***

For the writer, it is a story of his own native place. Shahnaz Bashir himself belongs to Natipora. Natipora is a locality in Srinagar city in Kashmir. It symbolizes the conflict in Kashmir. It is also known as the place of the graveyard of ancestors. As mentioned in a journalist meeting with Souzeina. S. Mushtaq of Hardnews media, Bashir had to locate the story in a place where everyone would find it amusing. He knows everything that happened during his adolescence. He aims to draw Natipora on the artistic map of the world and is contented to see it on the world map now.

Enforced disappearances in Kashmir have created a paralyzing atmosphere of terror in the groups of the missing persons’ families. Any investigation focusing on the children of half-

mothers is primarily missing or ignored. Not much has been done to feature their plight in a war-torn place like Kashmir. Bashir, unlike his contemporary writers, has explained the pain and extraordinary sufferings of Haleema, who appears in his book as a half-mother. Bashir's writing gives a sense to human beings what they get by reading literature. Literature makes human beings conscious of their environment even though it may not give them only pleasure and relaxation. Literature mirrors the truth of times, particularly the conflict and pain that often goes unrecorded in official accounts and documents. Panja writes about literature as follows:

Literature helped human beings to become conscious in their minds about actual conditions of existence. In this case, consciousness pointed towards the knowledge of social contradictions (conflicts, problems and issues linked with the class) which would help Productive group to attain freedom from needs and wants to control the domain of society collectively. (Panja 163)

Writing engages with experiences of social suffering. Pertaining to the question what social suffering is and how one can narrativize social suffering, Ramu Nagappan states that social suffering:

...pertains to the sometimes unknowable and innumerable physical emotional wounds in the community, to a variety of distress mediated by gender, class, caste, and religious affiliation. On the one hand, it also demands that we put such questions aside and examine the particular and the local. In what forms can such histories of social suffering be told? In the oral narrative, in the meticulously prepared statistical document, in the personal essay, in the novel, in the film that acts as documentary. In my discussion, these forms of imagining and reposting social suffering are inextricable from a particular geographical locus: the metropolis, the place where such suffering becomes visible (through the mass media, and through a variety of scholarly and literary discourses) and invisible (because it is so normalized, transformed into the immutable reality of the non-Western world.) (*Speaking Havoc* 11)

The conflict of the 90s has negatively affected the existence of the people of Natipora. This led them to disappear and die. Kashmir's ongoing turmoil has sparked several contemporary Kashmiri writers like Shahnaz Bashir to address the problems faced by common citizens in Kashmir. Bashir depicts all that he experienced. The novel spells out the heartbreaking occasions of the 90s, he states that the realities in Kashmir exist beyond newspaper headlines. (Hachette India 04:05-04:35)

His novel is based on the grim realities of a Kashmiri woman's life as well as the life of half-mothers. His only aim is to structure his novels and short stories not only to keep readers engrossed but also to make it essential for them to think over the underlying issues related to Kashmir. He is a self-taught writer, and his writing is driven by imagination, observation, and knowledge.

Bashir, through his imaginative articulation, has attempted to remember the unforgettable recollections of the disorganized occasions when detainment and disappearances are constantly disguised in Kashmir. In his novel, he has tended to this issue of disappearance in Kashmir as one of the ugliest truths of the 90s. His novel draws out the novelist's splendid work, and an incredible feeling of details. It offers a glance into the lives broken in the

historical circumstances of disturbance of Kashmir and how these lives survive the terrifying disappearances and murders of their close relatives and friends. Bashir has effectively offered a voice to the issue of authorized disappearances. The situation of each one of the habitants of Kashmir is that they have lost their friends and family in the endless regional war in Kashmir. Mothers always live in this hope that their beloved children will come back home. By making Haleema the protagonist of the novel, Bashir centers the novel around the issue of the mothers who have lost their dear ones in the conflict. Hence in that sense, she decides to be a conscious mother who addresses each one of those crushed women who lost their husbands and son in the conflict. *The Half Mother* throws light on a few facets of Kashmiri society, especially the terrible political predicament, and the severe measures utilized by armed forces to control the revolt such as capturing the young, fake encounters, torture in interrogation, and controlling both press and electronic media in the state.

Bashir likewise indicates the restrictions that the public authority puts on the media. They are not permitted to narrate the woeful stories of Kashmir and its inhabitants. Fahad Shah, an essayist, and a journalist remarking on the opportunity of the press in Kashmir comments:

In Kashmir, in any case, the state neither considers frank confession nor makes space for a spiritual reflection in which a group can see itself. The Indian powers won't allow free press in the Valley. The brutal domination of the claim for rights consistently prompts a tragedy. Such disasters and misfortunes have been looked at by nearly any individual who has attempted to uncover reality; dissidents have unavoidably confronted the fury of the government authority powers. The individuals who are lined up with elective media to describe Kashmir's stories have been either threatened or restricted. (Qtd. In Shah 9)

The title of Shahnaz Bashir's novel *The Half Mother* is profoundly symbolic and figurative. The term "*Half*" is taken by the writer from the term "*half widow*" which is used for those women, whose husbands were taken away by the Army and police. There is no evidence of their death, therefore these women cannot be declared widows but their husbands have gone missing, and in all probability are dead. But these women are not entitled to any compensation as they cannot be declared widows, hence the term half-widows. The term "*half*" denotes the list of people whose relatives, husbands, or sons are missing in the conflict. When one doesn't have any clue about the situation with the individual or family members who have disappeared, then the term "*half*" is given to them. Likewise, the writer has used the word "*Half Mother*" to depict the plight of mothers, whose children have disappeared during the conflict. Bashir writes in his novel:

So, for all such uncertain cases of women whose husbands have disappeared, we will prefix their status with "*Half*", Advocate Farooq explained. Half. The word ringed in Haleema's head. A cold pinch. And what about mothers, Farooq sahib? Haleema asked. Are they half mothers by rule? Everyone turned to her. Silence. Advocate Farooq sopped writing and looked over his pince-nez. Whether their children were dead or alive or missing, mothers would remain mothers – but Advocate Farooq was not sure. He didn't know how to respond to Haleema. He couldn't be certain what status of victimhood should be attested to her. 'So, am I a half mother?' Haleema repeated. (Bashir 142-43)



The novel's theme is serious, political as well as humanitarian. It rises above the state politics and brings the emotional side of what the common public goes through. It depicts the ache of a deprived mother and her epic search to locate her lone son lost in the conflict. Bashir has effectively given a voice to the distress and agony of the individuals who have lost their friends and family in the burning era of the 90s war. It is a sort of tribute made by the writer to the misery and never-ending thinking of the mothers for the arrival of their disappearing sons taken away by armed forces. In an interview, with Jayanthi Madhukar in Bangalore Mirror newspaper 'Turmoil Between the Pages', Bashir comments that the novel is profoundly metaphorical of the occasions of the 90s when disappearance became a regular practice in Kashmir. He says:

It is based on my imagination, memory, and experiences. I grew up through these chaotic years in strife-torn Kashmir. I have witnessed and felt things as much as Haleema has. It has all seeped into me. In Kashmir, interestingly and unfortunately, there lives Haleema in almost every mother. All those mothers in Kashmir whose sons disappeared in custody have, though, a similar story to tell but each has something unique to say about her respective tragedy. I have just tried to portray them collectively through Haleema. (Madhukar sc.3)

The theme of *The Half Mother* is talked about practically by the author himself. In an interview with *Safwat Zargar* in *Kashmir Life*, Bashir comments:

I have dedicated this book to all mothers and sons of Kashmir because not only those mothers or wives or sisters or daughters who have lost their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers have been victimized, but I think almost all Kashmiri mothers and sons are indirect victims of this unfortunate phenomenon of enforced disappearance. Because all mothers in Kashmir fear, they are very worried about the safety of their sons. Making it home in the evening in Kashmir would be a miracle. (Zargar sc.7)

### **Pitiful Condition of Mothers in Kashmir**

*The Half Mother* has its setting in the town Natipora, a zone that is situated on the edges of Srinagar city, around three kilometers away towards the south. It is the location of an ancestral cemetery. This area is enclosed by barbed wire, which is similar to the electric-wire-enclosed Kashmir border. No one can get past this razor-sharp line. People are very scared to enter it. Around the fenced area, a few rural inhabitants reside. To enter the other side of the fence, residents of that region must receive permission from the army and their special fence card. There is a card for those who have relatives or land on the other side of the fence. Everybody feels scared of the border shootings. Like other parts of the valley, this part of the valley becomes quite famous for people being killed and abducted by the military forces. As the revolt increased, the occupants of Natipora went under the hold of awful patterns of curfews, crackdowns, killings, and disappearances. (Bashir 32)

Aside from curfew, residents of the Natipora are exposed to different embarrassments and killings. Women also were oppressed in Kashmir by security powers. Many women were assaulted, tortured, and killed in backlash assaults. Throughout the valley in the 1990s, several structures of violence applied against women. They were frequently beaten, disfigured, burned, sexually abused, and assaulted by the security forces. (Bashir 32)

There are two below examples from the novel. There are numerous shocking stories of the suffering of military forces against innocent civilians. In the novel, one of the women in Natipora is named Rukhsana is beaten and embarrassed by the army personnel. She is stripped off in front of her family members who were tied with ropes by the troops. (Bashir 32)

Not just women, poor and common, innocent people also bear the brunt of violence. In an incident, poor Ramzan Dar's paddy crop is set on fire when he refuses to give up his son to the military forces. (Bashir 32)

During the past three decades, in Kashmir, thousands of women have grieved, and have lived in trauma, and agony. Their way of life is at peak of crises. They all experience the same trauma together. In addition to being suppressed by patriarchy and the violence and trauma they experience as Kashmiris, women in that region suffer a double burden. Their children also experience the same effects of trauma. Haleema's three generations have experienced trauma and anarchy. Every "half widow" and "half mother" is waiting for justice. We see how "... A daughter still waits for her father to wed her off. A wife searches for her husband. And a mother still pines for her son and waits for him to be a pallbearer when she dies." (Bashir 177)

The political conflict tends to affect the social life of the common people to a great extent. Such conflicting situations are at an interface of the controlling systems (such as police, army etc.) and the protesting masses (usually the common public, political agents or insurgents). The consequence of this conflict between the controlling systems and the protesting masses is borne by a third set of common innocent group of people who are neither a part of these forces nor participants. Their family members are lifted from their home on mere suspicion. In Haleema's case her son carried the same name as one of the terrorists. In *Social Suffering* the editors remark that:

The vicious spiral of political violence, causing forced uprooting, migration, and deep trauma of families and communities, while intensifying domestic abuse and personal suffering, spins out of control.... (Introduction x)

Such a situation further intensifies the stir amongst the protesting masses and poses a threat to the local as well as global structures of security. Therefore, the Kashmir conflict does not remain a simple local concern but impacts people globally too, particularly those Kashmiris who have migrated due to forced violence. These immigrants staying outside Kashmir are living in compromised situations. Therefore, there is no peace for the Kashmiris per say. At the same time women are the most vulnerable group to face the brunt of this conflicting violence as they bear both mental and physical mutilations.

Parveena Ahanger, one of the founders of APDP (Association of Disappeared Persons) who was in the quest of her teenage son who was taken by the Indian forces and never found. Similarly, Parveena's trauma is linked to that of Imran, who disappeared, like a messenger for the voices of disappeared persons. She takes the challenge to fight for the justice of other Kashmiris women. She represents all disappeared people through the APDP (Association of Parents of Disappeared People). The struggle for justice for the missing is one of the oldest in the history of human rights. Victims can unite on a platform and speak out for their rights. During the protests, victims' families keep photographs and posters of their disappeared children. On those posters it is written that "where are our dear ones?" (Kanjwal, Zahra and

Bhat 92) This group is called a resistant group that is ready to challenge any difficulties in its pursuit of justice for missing persons. With the use of this platform, people can collectively express their feelings and suffering.

### **Legal laws and Impact on the Citizens:**

With the passing of Haleema's father, AbJaan, the writer reveals the insensitive rule of the defense authorities and their military force in Natipora, the locality of Kashmir. Fahad Shah writes in his essay, 'Blood will be Avenged: An Introduction' published in the book, *Of Occupation and Resistance: Writing from Kashmir* edited and criticizes the killing of civilians by the defense forces.

There are draconian laws like PSA and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Both have been widely used to jail and kill civilians with impunity. Minors have been arrested and put in jails under PSA (12).

He criticizes the implementation of government acts 'The Armed Forces Special Powers Acts' (AFSPA) and 'Public Safety Act' (PSA). These acts affected people badly by legitimizing extra-legal killings through fake encounters in the Valley. According to the reports, Indian security forces have killed hundreds of unarmed civilians in Kashmir, including men, and women. And even children, before disguising their deaths as fake encounters. (*Of occupation and Resistance* 12-13) The author here discusses the topic of fake encounters of people that were common during the 1990s conflict. As mentioned in the novel that individuals were captured by the army and killed without any fault. Showkat, Salam's son-in-law worked as a tailor outside his home. One night he stayed in his shop to finish "bridal trousseau," working that night some troops came and dragged him away on the pretext of conversation. After that incident, he disappeared and after seven days, the police truck brought his body outside their neighborhood. "It was a fake encounter. They put a Kalashnikov and two hand grenades on him and declared it as a 'huge success' on TV." (Shah 97)

In the paper 'Reproducing Regimes of Impunity: Fake Encounters and the Information of Everyday Violence in Kashmir Valley', Haley Duschinski comments on the continued wait and sufferings of the families of disappeared sons:

...These killings may take place after the victim has been detained in official custody for at least a short period before death, or they may take place on the streets, before detention, as security forces or police officers or paramilitary personnel kill the individual at the moment of observation or apprehension. The extrajudicial killing is then followed by the official claim that the victim died in a legitimate military encounter with police or army forces. (Duschinski 111)

The same situation was created for Haleema's father AbJaan, murdered by Major Kushwaha out of hatred. He hates Haleema's father since the development of the bunker in front of their primary house door. The death of her father comes as a shock to Haleema, leaving her messed up and broken. The passing of AbJaan is a great loss in the Natipora locality. The tragic scene of AbJaan's demise is explained in these lines:

Three bullets were pumped into AbJaan, one in the neck, one in the heart. One in the stomach...Blood began to gurgle out of AbJaan's throat...A pool of blood gleamed in the dull sun near AbJaan's body. His throat was scabbed. His eyes remained open and



his mouth agape. Blood had started to congeal around the charred bullet holes on his palm. (Bashir 49-50)

Likewise, many soldiers and civilians lost their lives during encounters and cross-firing.

AbJaan's passing away brings misfortune for Haleema because all her family members are depending on AbJaan, a watchman, wage earner, and sympathetic father. Bashir depicts Haleema's suffering and desperation when she is deprived of her defender, AbJaan. Bashir writes how Haleema is in pain:

The woman tried to prevent Haleema from hurting herself. She was conscious now and in shock. She wanted the woman to tell her Ab Jaan was still alive. 'Please don't cry. My Ab Jaan is alive. Isn't he? *He is alive*. Why are you crying? She requested the women. Her tears had dried. The skin beneath her throat was red from chest thumping. Her cheeks had the imprints of her slaps. Her hair fell loose over her face. She laughed, and then abruptly ran towards a wall barefooted to bang her head. (Bashir 50)

As Haleema is grieving the passing of her father, she is hit with another misfortune that breaks her life forever. Following three months after her father's murder, destiny again plays its dirty role in her life. One fateful night her son, Imran gets captured by Major Kushwaha during a raid at night and is pushed into uncontrollable conditions that never allow him to return home. The military arrested him for sharing the information and names of other known militants from his territory. The namesake proxy of Imran has gone too far out of control, the other Imran is active as a regional officer of Natipora for 'The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF)'. Bashir depicts the heart-tearing incident of Imran's capture with a desperate mother asking before the soldiers for mercy. Haleema pointlessly pleads to the armed force to leave him. But her tearful pleas and requests are mercilessly dismissed by the armed force. Bashir explains:

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 . . . Haleema collapsed on the dirt road, wailing, barefooted, bare-headed... *Gaed ha kaertham, patro!* I am a perforated soul, my son, Haleema muttered in a sing-song voice. Two frozen trails of tears glistened on her cheeks. (Bashir 57)

As time passes there is no indication of Imran, and this influences her physically and mentally. When parents lose their sons, a part of them dies. Hence by losing Imran she loses her life. The state of her health presently goes from bad to worse. Alongside her actual physical health, her psychological wellness crumbles step by step and day by day. She started having horrible dreams and admitted that inanimate objects started conversing with her. She likewise talked to Imran's garments, kissing and sniffing them. She also began talking to herself to the dividers of the road. Occasionally, she would talk about the things that had some connection with Imran. On the other hand, she is crying and moaning. She opens the marked legacy trunk, takes out his notepads, and gradually traces his writing with her fingers. She frequently entertains insane fantasies and delusions about Imran being around. She has now become an unavoidable casualty of conditions with major mental handicap conditions. (Keerthana 1916)

Haleema talking to inanimate things refers to the mental torture she is going through. Torture needs to be understood in terms of its expansive definition. Talal Asad explains that:

The Category of torture is no longer limited to applications of physical pain: it now includes psychological coercion employing disorientation, isolation, and brainwashing. Indeed, the term “torture” in our day denotes not only behavior that is actually prohibited by law but also behavior that we desire to have so prohibited in accordance with changing concepts of “inhumane” treatment. (Bashir 297)

Therefore, it is important to understand that in the novel, it is not just Imran who is undergoing physical torture but Haleema’s mental torture and day to day struggle to find her son results in communication with inanimate objects. This describes her mental state of mind that befits the definition of torture.

### **Women as Empathizers**

Through Haleema, he has tended to the mental condition and the psychological desolation the women of Kashmir experienced by losing their friends and family members in the conflict. In *The Half Mother*, the author has presented a solid feature of a woman’s character that battles against every atrocity at every level. She looks everywhere for her missing son, making a lot of effort. She doesn’t feel damaged; however, her confidence in law and equity is broken. Her tireless spirit and rebellious nature in finding her son make her a very strong woman. The expectation can bring strength and change in an individual. Hope and expectation can teach assurance even in the most fragile person and makes human being cross all the boundaries and limits to save their loved ones. Hope offers life to the wrecked soul of Haleema and changes her into a hero. She is changed from being a simple ordinary woman into a woman with determination and strength to fight for justice and rights of Kashmiri women. Considering this purpose, she switches between locations and between helpers in search of any little information concerning her son. In another attempt, she meets the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) in his office and there she is told by the officer that a little fellow has been admitted to the military medical hospital and might be that teenager is Imran. She arrives at the military hospital that is situated behind the Badami Bagh Cantonment, Srinagar. She looks through every ward moving bed to bed, yet she can’t find her son Imran. There she sees young boys who have been tortured and are admitted to the medical hospital. Here, Bashir portrays the use of brutal tactics and inhuman methods used by armed forces on the detainees effected them physical and mental making them helpless forever. Writer writes:

Haleema saw limbless, fingerless, nail-less, hairless, toothless, eyeless, earless detainees - a variety of wriggling, howling, yowling amputated souls. A cold flux ran down her spine. The scene dazed her. ... She surveyed the boys whose kidneys had failed. They had been trampled over by cement rollers. All were handcuffed to their iron beds. ... She saw a handsome young man who was on a ventilator; they learned his anus had been bleeding uncontrollably. (Bashir 80)

This tale depicts the real image of the presence of the Natipora people who are the genuine victims of the circumstances over which they have no control in it. In a fight between the army and the militants, the innocent individuals of the valley suffered a lot. They bear the outcomes of militant activities. The writer portrays the unfair activities of the defense

specialists towards the inhabitants of Natipora after they are assaulted by the militants and the armed forces.

### **Mental Trauma and Health**

M Keerthana in his article 'Hope and Mental Trauma of Haleema in Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*' writes about the mothers whose health got affected by conflict. He writes that many women in Kashmir were enduring such a horrendous existence in constant danger. Kashmiri women who frequently lost their sons struggled day and night to get over the sorrow (Keerthana 1916). Haleema frequently had dreams about her son Imran visiting her house. Every time she thought about her son in a dream. She sobbed and felt more determined the next day to come back for her son. She worried about her son's thirst and her sons' 'memories' made no difference of day and night. She sacrificed her emotional and physical health to save her son. She was compelled by her love for him to abandon everything to find her missing son. Her body and mind were broken by her son's forced absence. She has faith and never lost hope for her son to show up. Although, she continued her son's search by coming home by sitting and gazing at the gate. Her daily search for her loved one resulted in her hopes and health being shaken. While in dreams, she murmurs like she rehearsed wedding madrigals many times. These sentences express the absurdity of her life:

The colour of everything is sorrow,

The colour of the moon is sorrow,

The colour of the streets is sorrow, and

The colour of memories is sorrow.

The colour of my heart, in its own heart, is sorrow.

The colour of my breath in sorrow,

The colour of sorrow is sorrow. (Bashir 5)

These lines link the pain of a mother overcoming the aches of the separation of her son. Haleema's pitiful condition and her affection for her son can be followed in the tune sung by Haleema. These lines express her hopelessness and aching for the appearance of her son. The disappearance of her son leaves her in anxiety, broken, and crushed.

The most traumatic time of Haleema's life begins after her son's detention. During her wounded and endless journey, he frantically visits various police stations in search of any information concerning her son. The night Imran is captured by security forces, she continues sobbing and weeping the entire night. The next morning, she makes it to Imam's house with swollen and clammy eyes to get help and the two of them choose to go to the police headquarters to file a 'First Information Report' (FIR) against Major Kushwaha. Like any other ordinary citizen, the way in which the system functions open up one by one to Haleema as she continues in her struggle step by step. First of all, on arriving at police headquarters she is stunned to hear those police can't register a complaint against the armed forces. Their work is only and only to recognize the dead bodies and carry and deliver the bodies to the expired family. The official in charge reveals to Haleema that they can't be of any assistance to her:

It has been a long time since we filed an FIR. A long, long time. We cannot lodge an FIR against the army.' The constable spoke in a countryside dialect. Our job is now confined to identifying; carrying and delivering dead bodies to their families...the only way is to approach the army itself. They take everyone they pick up to their local camps. (Bashir 63)

After coming back from the police station, her journey in the search of her disappeared son begins. Her journey about the whereabouts of her son takes her to places outside of Kashmir and within Kashmir. Through her desperate mission of searching for her son, the author brings to the front, the battle, and the difficulty of each one of the people who have lost family members and friends to the horrible disappearance. It prompts a frustrating ceaseless pattern of chasing the authorities, restless nights, and awaiting any expectation of seeing their adored ones return safely. Haleema alongside Imam, and with the aid of a police constable approaches the military camp which is located a kilometer away from Natipora. On arriving at the military camp, they request a watchman to fix a meeting with Captain who has picked up a little youngster the previous night from Natipora. The gatekeeper agrees however before he could say something else to Imam and Haleema, he is stopped by one of his partners who says that Major isn't here, and they can meet Lance Naik Sharmaji. Before advising Imam to meet Lance Naik Sharmaji while searching for him he mumbles and tells that his son's body has been shifted somewhere. Army personnel behaves very strictly with them. Bashir writes:

Yes, I saw major Sahib bring a boy last night. But . . . before the soldier could complete his sentence, one of his colleagues emerged and interrupted him with a wink and a cough. The Imam insisted on meeting the major. He is not here, the second trooper said stiffly...you can meet Lance Naik Sharmaji, but only you, the trooper told the Imam... The principal trooper, who provides some insight about Imran steps out to check on Imam before advising him to meet Lance Naik Sharmaji while searching him, he mumbles, Major has shifted your boy somewhere else. And then he loudly pretended to be strict, Chalo, Chalo! All of you wait here. (Bashir 66-67)

Seeing his possessions makes Haleema think about him. She holds Imran's clothes, talks to them, and kisses them. While ironing his school uniform, she also waits for him to return. Haleema is reminded of Imran's youth when she sees Jasmine's talcum powder. The common people's perception of the news from Kashmir is typically one of fear, which negatively affects their mental health. The residents are more fearful if there is a confrontation or cease-fire violation across the border. Due to their fractured memories, the locals have no desire to observe Eid, Diwali, or any other holiday. They experience the trauma of loss and disappearance. Within their own families, they have experienced countless tragedies.

Haleema neglects taking her medication at a prescribed time. She even forgets the scheduled time. She occasionally forgets to eat and ends up leaving food on the burner, which got burnt. Every time she gets a call to look for her son, she routinely forgets to lock her house before leaving. Trauma victims frequently forget to add salt to their food and sugar to their tea. They put sugar instead of salt. She struggles to get a good night's sleep because everything that happens to her during the day appears in her dreams. Only at night, she spends time in her home; during the day, she devotes her time to finding her son. Apart from her son's absence, Haleema has no interest in anything. When Haleema goes back to her house, her cows moo loudly over and over. She rubs its horn and pats her back. She also sees tears in the cow's eyes. She says, "I am broke, I don't have a penny now" (Bashir 109).

### **Mother's Search: Visiting Torture Centers and Other Places**

Meanwhile, Imam becomes more familiar with a boy who looked similar in appearance to Imran from his neighborhood, Mohammad Shafi. He has seen Imran at the camp where Shafi's boy is confined. Imam with Haleema goes to deal with the military camp named "Malaysia." She desperately explains how Imran looked to the Major and afterward shows him his image. However, the army Major appropriately denies truly having picked up any kind of the name Imran from the Natipora locality.

Through his novel, Bashir brings out the issues faced by the family members who are in a desperate state and what happens to them when they approach the other security official for help. They move to various interrogation centers inside and outside the state. Lastly, with the progression of time, every member of the family is left to anticipate the return of their loved ones all alone. Haleema continues her search and suffers physically and mentally. Her journey proceeds further and she meets with another couple, Rafiq and Shafiq who were going to visit their son to meet in Tihar prison. In a desire to meet Imran, Haleema first goes to jail in Udhampur, Jammu. However, the superintendent of the jail after seeing the photo of Imran told Haleema that the boy in this photo is not there. Next time they arrive at a prison in Kathua and return without any clue. After that they start for their next destination, Tihar jail. Haleema and her friends were stopped by the authorities from attending the meeting because they are all Kashmiris. After reaching Tihar prison too, she finds no clue about her teenage son. The search for her son becomes her daily routine. She has knocked on all the doors and gone wherever possible. Prisons and courts have become her day-to-day routine for searching. She even approaches an association called SHRC, the State Human Rights Commission, to enlist her case to present her front as strong. She meets the director of the association to register a case. She needs a piece of information from the "PCR" to ensure that they have not received any such dead body that resembles her son Imran. He further clarifies that this association would not assist her with getting any strong justice. They work under the state government. They will not register a complaint without a "PCR" certificate. Their organization is only 'toothless-tiger' and assured that don't expect anything from them. Bashir writes:

We are a state government association. Our commission is a toothless tiger. At the end of the day, we will only be able to register your case and claim compensation. Not more. Nothing more than that. Don't expect justice from us' he said honestly. (Bashir 132)

That night at the PCR mortuary, she meets an old-aged man, Khizir. He has performed more than 10,000 post-mortems throughout his service. She shows him the image of Imran and inquires as to whether he has seen him about. Khizir reveals to her that the body of a little youngster by the name of Imran is with the police and will be conveyed to the PCR mortuary for an examination soon. The next morning in a troubled state Haleema goes to the funeral home to recognize the body. In any case, fortunately, the body isn't of Imran but of a Gujjar boy who is, "accepted to have been tortured to death, in the Wular" (Bashir 135). Khizir likewise tells Haleema about the possibility of his work. By making Khizir a mouthpiece, Bashir gives a scorching account of how the army brutally killed the young innocent boys in the torture centers or any fake encounters throughout the valley. Bodies of these young boys were disfigured and mutilated. Khizir tells Haleema that:



I have stitched heads on bodies; heads, which anyway failed to form a face - so defiled, so disfigure... then there was a young boy whose stomach I found coals and strips of cloth. His gut smelt of kerosene. When I probed his nails, I found something sticking to them. The forensic report later said they were traces of his skin. (Bashir 134-35)

### **Role of media in Kashmir**

Haleema doesn't lose hope. She sells her cows, jewelry, orchard, and even her costly copper utensils to raise money to free her son from the army. She first visits a radio broadcast to take the help of a news announcer to publish the information on her son's disappearance. However, the news announcer tells her, "Radio doesn't air this sort of information." (Bashir 72). He asks her to try to publish news in Newspaper. There was a TV station behind the radio broadcast, he asks her to go there. After that, she continues to go to a TV station with the expectation that it may communicate information about her lone son. She is told by a young lady that the newsmaker would be of no assistance to her, and they won't broadcast any such information by calling it "*dangerous and unconventional*" (Bashir 73). The legendary philosopher Karl Marx wrote in the *Rheinische Zeitung*:

If the censorship is honest in its intention, it would prevent arbitrariness, but it makes arbitrariness into a law. He said that the free press is the ubiquitous vigilant eye of a people's soul, the embodiment of a people's faith in itself, the eloquent link that connects the individual with the state and the world, the embodied culture that transforms material struggles into intellectual struggles and idealizes their crude material form. (qt. in Shah 8)

When the authority of electronic media won't announce her son's disappearance story and carry her situation to the authorities, she finds herself approaching BBC's department office in Srinagar. She meets a BBC journalist, Izhar who helps her and guarantees her to publish a little report on the BBC and even takes her to a neighborhood Urdu newspaper office. It is with his assistance she gets her tragic story published in an Urdu newspaper, *Waadi ki Aawaaz*. The editor of the newspaper, G.N. Shaida also discusses the government's limitation on publishing such type of news. He replies to Izhar, "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" (Bashir 76). Shaida says that Haleema's story will be printed in the newspaper. Kashmir people are very helpful to each other. Bashir writes:

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 don't follow their policy. But I don't care,' Shaida said, 'Haleema's grief will still be printed in my paper.' (Bashir 76).

The portrayal is utilized by the writer to depict the tragic tale of a mother. She examines the newspaper for the news of her son's disappearance. She always sees the primary page of the newspaper. When she finds the news of her son in the newspaper; Sits in the kitchen, spread the paper out, and reads the news aloud. The headline says, "*Haleema Ka Dugna Sadma*" (Haleema's Double Tragedy), and finds the photograph of Imran surrounded by information on his disappearance in Urdu. She is satisfied after reading the full news and places the paper into a trunk. Bashir writes:

She scanned the first page while simultaneously walking and tripping on the pebbles. And there it was, at the bottom of the page. A small photo of Imran, in black and white, was printed on the story. She kissed it, her eyes moist... A portion of the news continued on the third page... She continued to read the report, erring with some long and twisted words she was unfamiliar with. She read the report several times. And when she was satisfied, she folded the newspaper carefully and tucked it into the heirloom tin trunk. (Bashir 78)

Indian journalist Kuldeep Nayar visited Kashmir in 1989 to evaluate how the circumstances of Kashmir. He visited different torture centers and detainees that were allotted to detainees. He said that the situation there was beyond limits. The physical and mental tortures given to the prisoners in the centers were ghastly. In these centers, detainees were given worse treatment than monsters (Nayar 316-17). They were beaten savagely and tortured mercilessly in the torture centers. He says:

That was the point at which the chambers, called Papa One and Papa Two were set up. They were cross-examination communities' centers where incredible brutalities were committed...If at any time the historical backdrop of *zulum* [torture] by the security forces is recorded carefully, the interrogation centers during conflict time in Kashmir will rank very high up the stepping stool. (Nayar 317)

The regular experience of political disturbances, historical disturbances, and clashes provides rich material to the writers. These powers produce considerations in the author to bring to light the horrors of conflict. These considerations are revealed in their writings. Once more, the writer is, without any doubt a result of his milieu, he will undoubtedly reflect his own time in his works. Lucien Goldman observes that "at any given moment social and historical reality always presents itself as an extremely complex mixture, not of structures but the process of structurization and destruction" (Goldman 3).

This cited articulation of Goldman provides that the connection between writing and society is so closely interrelated that the writing of literature can be viewed as the standard instrument of social or historical examination. It is seen that during the '90s clashes the destruction that happened to individuals of Kashmir became very difficult for them to deal with. Consequently, to check the unrest in Kashmir, India militarized the entire valley. The military control of Kashmir and the revolt impacted the existence of the innocent individuals of Kashmir. Against this background, Bashir has made an effort to speak up about the social sufferings and agony of individuals in the valley brought about by the conflict. He brilliantly presents the dark time of the 90s when individuals of the valley were trapped in the ambiguity of life and death. During those days everybody was uncertain because there was no assurance of getting back home once one was out of the house. The possibility of continuous disappearances was continuously at the back of the mind of the essayist and is constructed emotionally in his book *The Half Mother* to make the world perceive the significantly tragic human story of Kashmir.

In the novel, Bashir portrays the manners by which the Kashmiris used to protest against the military. Once they walk towards '*Chrar-e-Sharief*', the holy place of Sheik '*Noor-u-Wali*' supporter holy saint of Kashmir. Their walk towards the hallowed place is an indication of dissent against the injustice meted out to the residents of Kashmir. Through these exhibitions,

the Kashmiri people are showing their revolt against the public authority and expressing their interest in self-determination.

The Government to assume responsibility for riotous circumstances declares a curfew with shoot-at-sight orders for any individual who challenges the curfew limit. Restrictions on the development of population inside their areas and towns are very scary. While in the conflict, the government dealt with residents in a terrible way. Whenever they feel a small doubt, incitement, or some information about the militants, they put specialists in force, put the area under curfew, and deploy armies in the valley. This disturbs the everyday life of the people. Residents remain inside their houses for safety. Individuals are forced at weapon peak to stay in the four walls of their homes. Kashmir reproduces a natural characteristic upgrade to neutralize in any event, when there is only the smallest sign with that impact. Anyway, people suffered badly during curfews and checking. People couldn't figure out how to grapple with their luck. Aliya and Saiba in a paper, "*Curfewed in Kashmir: Voices from the valley*" remark on the limitations of the army forced on people during curfews and lockdowns:

Indian military forces have seriously restricted regular citizens by barricading streets, neighborhoods, and whole towns with blockades designated spots, and check posts with the twisting of concertina wire. Police and paramilitary units monitor the roads, streets and frequently scare nearby inhabitants by breaking the windows of their homes, chasing them off the roads, and now and again beating them without provocation. Past encounters of life under curfew have driven a few neighborhoods to set up their stone and cement pipe obstructions to watching police vehicles from patrolling on their roads, streets and creating additional damage to people's properties. (*Curfewed in Kashmir* 10-14)

*The Half Mother* highlights the novelist's outstanding talent of honesty by showing reality. It provides a glimpse of the lives torn apart by Kashmir's historical circumstances of unfathomable turmoil and how these lives have tried to adapt survival techniques to such a painful experience. Bashir raises awareness of enforced disappearances in Kashmir as well as the suffering of everyone who has lost their loved ones to a territorial war and their unrelenting desire for their return. Bashir focuses on the plight of all the mothers who have lost their sons in the conflict by making Haleema, the protagonist of the book. She, therefore, aspires to be a universal mother who stands in for all those bereaved mothers from the conflict. *The Half Mother* also sheds light on several additional facets of life in Kashmir, such as a corrupt political leadership, the military's use of harsh tactics to quell the insurgency, such as arrests, staged encounters, torture in detention facilities, etc. and the state's control of the electronic and print media.

### **Conclusion:**

The article demonstrates that *The Half Mother* offers a compelling literary intervention into the discourse on conflict and human suffering in Kashmir. By centring maternal experience, Bashir foregrounds the emotional consequences of enforced disappearance and prolonged militarisation. The narrative challenges dominant political representations by privileging personal testimony and psychological realism. In doing so, the novel not only records trauma but also asserts motherhood as a site of moral resistance and endurance. This reading affirms the importance of contemporary South Asian fiction in addressing humanitarian crises and contributing to broader debates on memory, violence, and social justice.

**Endnote:**

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<sup>i</sup> Kashmir has two torture facilities: Papa 1 and Papa 2. Most of the time, soldiers transport prisoners to Papa 2. It is found at Gupkar Road. This location is both gorgeous and horrifying. When Haleema visits her son Imran in *The Half Mother* novel, she notices the location's terrible state. She witnesses crying and complaining from youngsters with missing limbs, fingers, nails, hair, teeth, eyes, and ears.

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