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'Half Widows and Half Mothers': Traumatic Voices of Women From the Literary Narratives of Jammu and Kashmir

Abstract:

*This study is an attempt to explore the traumatic voices of women as half-mothers and half widows in the selected Kashmiri Anglophone fiction. Since the partition of the Indian Sub-continent, Kashmiris have been subjugated to violence and brutality under occupation. The lives of Kashmiri women have been worse, particularly during the 1990s, when the militancy increased because of hostile policies of the Indian government, which resulted in violence and brutality. Owing to their strength and resilience, the Kashmiri women have withstood the oppressive conditions. Compared to men, they have been at a loss while losing husbands and sons in a blind war of aggression and power. Using textual analysis and qualitative research paradigm, the study is based on Bashir's *The Half-Mother* (2014) through the lens of La Capra's *Acting out versus Working through* and Caruth's *Theory of Double Trauma*. The study reveals that women are not only victims but also fighters.*

Key Words:

Acting Out, Working Through, Half-Widows, Half-Mothers, Kashmir, Loss, Trauma, Women.

Introduction

Against the backdrop of the Kafkaesque world of occupied Kashmir, women occupy a central position in the fictional works of Anglophone fiction in Kashmir. The literary texts capture the essence of womanhood against the brutal system in the on-going Kashmir conflict. Sikander (2012) mentions that due to the armed conflict in post-1989 Kashmir, the Kashmiri women assumed the new responsibility of working from the inner and outer circle of home. They come to the forefront owing to the absence of their sons, husbands, fathers and brothers due to the war-ravaged situation in Kashmir. Kashmiri women have faced many personal tragedies that have brought forth many fictional voices depicting the on-going crisis. The war in which the women have been fighting has been a war of struggle and survival. Women eventually filled the gaps that developed in the absence of male members of the society during the armed struggle of the 1980s in Kashmir. Tracing the role of women in Kashmiri society, Malik (2015) interprets the notions of self-construction and agency of Muslim women in the political struggles during the 1980s in Kashmir. Although the social or religious roles for women have existed before the arrival of mass resistance culture in Kashmir, it was only during the 1980s armed conflict and struggle that women adopted stronger political roles. These roles were associated with the notions of nationhood and self. It was a time of greater mobility for organizations such as Dukhtaran e Millet, Muslim Khawateen Markaz and the Jammu and Kashmir mass movement. These political organizations empowered women by assigning their leadership

roles and included them in the decision making process. Malik (2015) opines that the era of the 1980s in Kashmir is marked by questions of identity, selfhood and self-construction. Muslim women are seen either as victims or as a support to the male agency in political happenings. With reference to the victim status of women, [Manecksha \(2017\)](#) mentions the concept of half-widows that became a catchphrase during the 1990s and persisted until the date when women whose husbands went missing suffered more than anybody else due to militarization and enforced disappearances in Kashmir. These women lived in emotional limbo because

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they remained uncertain regarding their spouses or sons being either alive or dead. The enforced disappearances led to the development of economic problems for women because, in traditional communities, men were the sole breadwinners but in their absence, women could not inherit property or could not do bank transfer because, for that, death certificates were required. In the case of half widows, it was not possible because no one knows whether the husband was alive or not. The question of re-marriage was also not possible, thus further aggravating problems for these women.

The present study is an effort to voice out the literary representation of women and their conditions during the 1980s and 1990s Kashmir. In this respect, the Anglophone fiction of Jammu and Kashmir has been selected to capture the lives of Kashmiri women from the perspective of individual trauma. Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* is one such significant text that deals with the suffering of women in the valley under occupation. The novel was published in 2014 and since then has created ripples in society owing to its heartfelt representation of women in conflict.

Research Statement

Women in any society are considered to be the most marginalized when it comes to the way they are being treated. Fiction, in particular, depicts the condition of women in society by looking at their responses and attitude in hostile circumstances. The women in Kashmir are doubled marginalized, owing to the hostile system and being left alone to survive without husbands and sons. Under Indian occupation, they suffer from the loss of the male members, thus becoming half mothers and half widows. This research study deals with the ways women in Kashmir are coping with the traumatic situation in the form of witnessing not only the death of their loved ones but also emerging as strong beings rather than mere victims. For women, against the backdrop of violence, enforced disappearances and brutality, it is an everyday war of survival.

Objectives of the Study

The current study is based on the following objectives.

- To depict the representation of traumatized women as half-mothers and half widows in war-ravaged Kashmir in the selected Anglophone fiction of Jammu and Kashmir
- To analyze the coping mechanism used by women characters to deal with trauma in the selected Anglophone fiction of Jammu and Kashmir

Research Questions:

The study addresses the following research questions.

- In what ways the traumatic condition of women characters are depicted in Bashir's *The Half Mother*?
- How do the female characters cope with their traumatic conditions in Bashir's *The Half Mother*?

Delimitation

This research study is only limited to Shahnaz Bashir's fictional work, *The Half Mother*. The theoretical perspective of La Capra is used to depict the traumatic condition of women characters in the selected Anglophone fiction of Jammu and Kashmir. The concept of double trauma and Acting out versus working through has been applied to the women characters that express the ways in which women cope with the traumatizing situations in their life and the subsequent effect it has on their psyche.

Literature Review

The introduction of trauma into literary studies is seen in the works of Caruth and Felmon. Caruth, in particular, has argued an unclaimed moment of trauma that works as a witness to the actual incident of trauma.

According to Caruth, trauma acts as a wound that cries a painful reality, which is otherwise unavailable and bears witness to the actual incident that might have taken place. Caruth has spoken at length about the language of trauma and the connection between psychoanalysis and literature. She illustrates that both psychoanalysis and literature represent the knowing and unknowing. Felman and Laub (1992) opine that figurative representation of trauma in literary text displaces referential truth. Many other trauma literary theorists have supported the role of literature in capturing the essence of trauma in a literary text. [Hartman \(1995\)](#) emphasizes that literature and art have the ability to express the traumatic occurrence of the real and can transcend the real world in its representation of trauma. [Vickroy \(2002\)](#) highlights trauma literature though it takes its materials from social and historical conditions, it highlights an event from a more personalized perspective, thus adding to the existing knowledge based on the lives of the people in a given society. Horvitz (2002), on the other hand, argues that trauma literature unveils oppressive ideologies by bringing forth cultural and socio-political context in which that trauma literature is written. [Whitehead \(2004\)](#) also endorses the need for literature of trauma so that the writer can detach himself from traditional literary realism and focus instead on postmodernist forms in literature.

The Kashmir conflict has been viewed from many various perspectives. Kaul (2011) mentions the everyday cyclical pattern of violence that has brought people into protest and rebellion. He depicts the issue in these words, "a generation and more have come of age in Kashmir knowing only the brutality and the everyday suspicions of a civic order riddled with informers for the state or for anti-state groups, and for many of them, it remains incomprehensible why a nation lauded as the world's largest democracy has remained immune to their suffering" (p.175-176). Though the Kashmir issue has been addressed on various platform, however, its representation in the literature has been not much; therefore, the current study focuses on the lives of people, especially women from the 1980s and 1990s era.

Research Methodology

Research Method

In the current study, a qualitative research paradigm is used. The approach to this research is interdisciplinary in the sense that it links the field of psychology and literature through the focus given to trauma at the individual level and its subsequent impact on the lives of people who undergo it. Qualitative research deals with the ways in which people make meaning of the world and their lived experiences. [Heynik and Tymstra \(1993\)](#) mention Jones' view that "People develop over their lives a personal framework of beliefs and values with which they selectively and subjectively build meaning and significance in events. It is this framework ... that the qualitative researcher is interested in learning about" (p. 294). Qualitative research is also based on biography and social context in which a certain phenomenon takes place. It studies the lived experiences of the people and the way they interpret their circumstances. Following a qualitative research design, the study uses textual analysis as a method of research. According to Bely (2005), textual analysis is empirical in nature and interpretation in the textual analysis is done using extra-textual knowledge using secondary data. The text is made of multiple writings, and it is significant to consider minute details present in the text as well as the historical moment in which interpretation is made.

Theoretical Framework

The current study uses the theoretical lens of trauma in literary studies. It is based on the concepts of Trauma, Absence and loss by La Capra and Theory of Double Trauma by Cathy Caruth. Drawing on the works of Freud and psychoanalysis, La Capra and Caruth both focus their attention on the survivor or victim's individual trauma. Caruth's concept is based on the latency of trauma that shows that the survivors of traumatic incident experience flashbacks or hallucination of that incident belatedly. The traumatic incident becomes incomprehensible. Caruth's double trauma illustrates the idea that the survivor of trauma undergoes double trauma, not only by witnessing the death of others but also by surviving and seeing his survival as trauma. The

survivor sees his trauma when he has to go through the loss or death of others in the form of flashbacks. In this way, he goes through a double trauma.

La Capra's Trauma, absence and loss addresses the concepts of loss and absence and illustrates how the conversion of absence into a loss leads to endless melancholy, mourning and aporia. In his work, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), he has given the concept of Acting out and Working through. Acting out is a process in which the survivors of trauma are haunted by a traumatic incident, which is so intense that they are unable to come out of it. While working through is a process that involves the way the survivor is able to differentiate between the traumatic incident and normal everyday life. The survivor or witness of trauma mourns the accompanying loss. The double trauma, as proposed by Caruth and the coping mechanisms given by La Capra, has been used to analyze the female characters in Bashir's *The Half Mother*.

Analysis

The Half Mother deals with the issue of enforced disappearances set in the backdrop of 1980s and 1990s Kashmir. It is the story of Haleema, whose only son Imran goes missing after the Army takes him to an unknown place on the spur of suspicion. The story then unfolds the constant search of a mother for her missing son in war-ravaged Kashmir. It expresses the agony, agitation and constant suffering of a mother who is all alone not only to witness the death of her father but also to bear the absence of her son. Haleema emerges as a strong woman who never loses hope in search of her missing son. She meets the journalist Izhar and registers her plea. She tries to reach out to the political agent in the form of the Chief Minister and voices out her fears and sufferings regarding not only her son's absence and innocence but also of countless others in the entire process. Her efforts include joining and representing the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Persons and protesting for enforced disappearances by the Indian Army, in the process voicing out concern for innocent people of Kashmir. Haleema's journey starts from a personal tragedy of a failed marriage to witnessing the death of her father Ab Joo at the hands of the brutal Army. As if it was not enough, one day, she loses her only son Imran when the Indian Army makes takes him to an unknown place. The trauma of the death of the father and losing her only child in the form of his disappearance can be taken in Caruth's perspective as double trauma. It is the trauma of not only witnessing the death of a much-beloved father but also the bearing of the absence of a son who was Haleema's only hope in life. The novel illustrates the lonely life of a woman who hopes and re-hopes until the time comes when the hope is extinguished in the form of Haleema's own death. In one of the interviews, Bashir (NAW interview with Shahnaz Bashir, June 14, 2014) mentions the basic idea behind writing this fictional work. It was to introduce to his readers the lonely life of a mother against the backdrop of enforced disappearances in Kashmir. The writer has looked back in time to bring to the limelight all that was placed in oblivion. The story of half mother is like bringing back from the past, the story of cruelty and oppression that Kashmir witnessed in the 1980s and 1990s. The purpose of writing the novel has also been to record what occurs in the life of people who face the disappearances of their loved ones. It is argued that many stories can be read in the form of newspaper articles etc., but it is fiction only that gives a personal angle to the statistical facts that have been mentioned in a news report. Bashir (Kashmir Life, June 16, 2014) opines that fiction gives the author an opportunity to not only tell what happened but also how it happened in a much better way. *The Half Mother* is not just the story of one person and her personal journey; it is the story of many mothers, wives and sisters whose lives are governed by only one word, and that is fear. All of these half mothers and half widows are concerned about the safety of their loved ones. However, the word safety or safe heaven becomes an illusion, especially when the insurgency starts, and in retaliation, there is a strong reaction from the Indian Army.

When the insurgency starts, a kind of crisis develops in the valley leading to bombardment. The village of Natipora becomes a war zone between militants and the Indian Army. This creates a traumatic impact on people living in the village. Fear becomes the norm and the only consolation people get by reciting religious verses. The next morning brings summon of death because Haleema's father, Ab Joo, becomes a victim and is

killed by the Army. His death becomes traumatizing for Haleema. It looks as if the entire world has fallen on her. "Haleema frenetically slapped her face and her chest and pulled her hair. blood began to gurgle out of Ab Jaan's throat. She fainted" (Bashir, 2014, p. 49). After witnessing the death of her father, Haleema's situation becomes worse. "She was conscious now and in shock. She wanted the women to tell her that Ab Jan was alive. 'please don't cry. My Ab Jan is alive'" (Bashir, 2014, p. 50). Witnessing the death of a closed one is unbearable for Haleema, who remain in shock and disbelief, thinking her father to be alive. This illustrates the overpowering grief that stays with her throughout her life. Her father's death triggered the pain from which she could not come out. "Your death has battered me" (Bashir, 2014, p. 52) utters Haleema in her suffering and pain. In addition to the pain of losing the father, two weeks after the death of Ab Joo, Haleema witnesses another loss, and that is the enforced disappearance of her son Imran. Apparently, the Army believed that Imran was involved with the insurgents and hence was held responsible for any mishaps in the valley. Haleema's condition becomes worse after losing her son. She constantly faces trauma, as highlighted by Caruth. It is her trauma of survival in the form of becoming helpless, in not being able to get back her son but also in terms of reenacting the feelings of loss by constantly thinking about Imran and imagining him being beaten by the troops. "she imagined him crying for her help..." (Bashir, 2014, p. 58). According to La Capra, the traumatic incident is too overwhelming for the victim and in return, the ability to grasp it is beyond the human mind, therefore in Caruth's perspective, it is an elision of memory that Haleema expresses in the form of constant shock on the death of her father and on the disappearance of her son. We can see here that the fiction writer contributes to the actual event by giving it a personal angle.

As far as mourning the loss is concerned, one sees that Haleema, after the disappearance of Imran, starts forgetting about Ab Jaan's death. To her, it seems like decades have passed away—her trauma in the form of her son's disappearance surfaces in the form of a dream. In the second section of the book, Haleema constantly searches for her son and goes through sometimes help and sometimes exploitation at the hands of others. During one such moment when she meets the family of Abdus Salam, she is informed about his daughter, who lost her husband to the Army in a fake encounter, thus termed half widow. The suffering of the young girl was too overwhelming for Haleema, whose trauma can never end. In a dream sequence, she symbolically reenacts her own trauma. She enters the shop of Abdus Salam, the barber and begs Imran to come with her, but Imran gets free of himself and starts running. The very act of running and then disappearing forever is a repetition of Haleema's trauma, her constant search with the futile end. "she woke up, bathed in sweat, repeatedly muttering, 'I looked for you, I looked for you everywhere..'" (Bashir, 2014, p. 99). [Caruth \(1995\)](#) mentions the survivor's dream where his unconscious is involved and which acts like his trauma reenactment.

A traumatizing situation arises during the course of the novel when Haleema, after searching for many days, visits Khizar, whose job was to do a postmortem of dead bodies. Khizar mentions a dead body by the name of Iman before Haleema. The very moment of taking the name becomes a moment of fear for Haleema. It is a classic symptom of the traumatizing situation for Haleema. "Haleema shrivelled with fear and premonition at this news or rumour or whatever it is. Her mouth went absolutely dry, her lips chapped" (Bashir, 2014, p. 135). A further episode of Caruth's double trauma and La Capra's Acting out is seen in Haleema's situation when she roams around the hills and calls out Imran's name with a howl. She repeatedly goes through the same vein of mourning.

There is another small incident in the novel related to Haleema's visit to the wedding. The beating of a dollop of lamb salamis at the wedding is associated with the preparation of food that is to be served to the guests. For Haleema, the beating sound is ominous because it reminds her of her loss. She mysteriously develops feelings of loss during the entire time. "With each thud, Haleema mysteriously felt a certain sense of loss, a loss of time or something else. It made her heart palpitate (Bashir, 2014, p. 148). The loss of time is a reference to the time she has spent in search of her missing son. It looks as if she has been running against time and has been incapable of saving her son.

In the wedding scene of the daughter of the secretary of the chief minister, the arrival of Haleema, Yousaf and Sakina express the ill-treatment they receive at the hand of the government representatives. The minister whom they visit refuses to provide any help stating that all of us have been suffering in the same war of aggression. “we cannot do anything. I can only pray for you” (Bashir, 2014, p. 151) is a typical answer the minister offers in reply to the help demanded and expected by Haleema and her companions.

In La Capra’s view, it is the Acting out versus Working Through, which are used to cope with traumatic loss. For Freud (1895), the survivor of trauma needs a healing process that involves various stages. He proposed melancholia and mourning as two important stages involved in the process of coping. In the classic example, where Acting out is a form of behavior in which a victim is unable to come out of the traumatizing situation, in Working through the survivor of trauma is able to differentiate between past and present and can reconnect with life to deal with h/her trauma. One of the interesting things about the central character Haleema is that despite being a homely person, Haleema, after undergoing a tragic situation, become strong enough to cope with all suffering, for example, by searching her son everywhere, either in courts, police stations or detention centers. Her search becomes a never-ending process. She becomes more empowered by turning into a leader for the entire female community who lost their sons, husbands or brothers in a blind war of power and violence. The Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Persons is formed under her, and she is taken as a leader, “I think our head should be Haleema. We are unlettered. She is a bit more experienced (Bashir, 2014, p. 141).

During the course of the narrative, the political realm and law and order system proved to be hostile towards victims and their relatives, as we see in the case of Haleema and her son. However, the people collectively take action by protesting against the brutal and unjust system. Also, they form an association by the name of Association of the Relatives of the Disappeared Persons. Owing to a large number of enforced disappearance made routinely by the Indian Army, the number of people as relatives swarmed the courts and demanded justice. Haleema becomes a resilient person by leading the people in the cause of justice. She fights not only her case but also the case of others with strength and spirit. Her becoming a half mother can be linked with a crisis of identity too as one of the characters, Advocate Farooq says, “so, for all such uncertain cases of women, whose husbands have disappeared, we will prefix their status with half” (Bashir, 2014, p. 142). The status of half bestowed to all women who lost their male counterparts is symbolic of the identity loss too and thus come under the category of victims. However, it is pertinent to note the amount of effort placed by these resilient women in the face of oppression. Shafiq, who becomes Haleema’s sole companion, is another victimized character whose brother is taken away by the Army. She accompanies Haleema in search of her missing son. Haleema’s constant struggle turns out to be a disappointment when placed in front of the political system, but she makes herself understand that “I have to keep hoping...I cannot be defeated like this...I have to go home and keep waiting...” (Bashir, 2014, p. 154). Even when she hopes that one day she will meet her son, she lapses back to the same traumatizing situation of having a dream in which she tries to catch Imran but fails to do so. “while Imran tries to escape, Haleema clutches his wrist to not let him go. Yet, in a fraction of a second, he manages to slip out of her grip. ...he is nowhere to be found...she attempts a scream...” (Bashir, 2014, p. 158-159). It is interesting to note that despite Haleema’s traumatizing condition that persists throughout the narrative, her resilience to cope trauma remains consistent. However, it is at a very later stage in the narrative that through Izhar, the journalist, we come to know about Haleema’s death. Many instances in the novel show loss of identity or self for female characters. While describing the meeting with Haleema, Izhar mentions her as somebody deprived of her actual self, as if she is no longer the same person. “...she looks delusively bland without them, a demure person, not herself” (Bashir, 2014, p. 164).

Another coping strategy used by Haleema, especially after undergoing trials and tribulations, is adopting escapism. Reality is shunned by using sleep. When Izhar goes to see Haleema in her house, she mentions sleep as a way to escape the harsh reality of her life, i-e, the absence of her son, who will never come back. “I want to sleep dreamlessly. I want to rest in peace. Just that, I don’t want to know what this world is or whether

something like it exists” (Bashir, 2014, p. 176). Escapism only leads to death. It is death that triumphs over life for Kashmiri women.

Conclusion

Thus, the Kashmiri Anglophone fictional works such as Bashir's *The Half mother* is symptomatic of the identity crisis of women in Kashmir. It depicts their individual trauma as well as collective trauma that leads to identity change. The traumatic life makes these half widows or half mothers of Kashmiri appear as victims who try to escape traumatic condition by becoming oblivious of their own reality. However, while coping with trauma, this female also become resilient beings who defy all obstacles and try to cope with the hostile circumstances with the hope that one day they will meet their loved ones who have been engulfed in the blind war of power and violence.

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