



THE HALF MOTHER: A MEMOIR OF MISERY, MISFORTUNE AND TRAUMA

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ABSTRACT

Shahnaz Bashir's the Half Mother: A novel (2014) is the text that mainly deals with the life of its central protagonist, Haleema who is a mouthpiece of infinite miseries and misfortunes that the people living in the turmoil riddled Kashmir valley encounter on daily basis. The careful reading of the novel reveals that Shahnaz Bashir not only succeeded in bringing the Kashmir catastrophe to the forefront, but also aptly rooted Haleema's fateful tale and intermingled it in the socio-cultural milieu of nineties to vividly picture the pains and pangs of the people, irrespective of race or religion. Since, trauma is a byproduct of war, conflict and other gruesome events, its depiction cannot be de-linked from literary texts, dealing with the events of holocaust. The diverse ill-effects of traumatic experience on the human psyche can best be portrayed through the works of literature, as art is informed by the tilling of human psyche to explore vital facets of external influence on both conscious and unconscious mind. Therefore, the paper as such will analyse The Half Mother and try to explore Haleema's encounters with trauma and its bad effects upon the human mind, keeping in view the theoretical insights from Caruth Cathy's seminal text, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History.

Keywords: traumatic experience, misfortune, conflict, half widow

INTRODUCTION

The novel, *The Half Mother* is very intimate but awfully grim tale set in the downtown area of Natipora, Srinagar, in the Valley of Kashmir. The novel is woven mainly through its central protagonist, Haleema, a widow who in the course of her life witnessed gruesome

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incidents of violence, torture, humiliation and deaths of her own dear one's and other innocent people in the turbulent decade of 1990s. She is not only the mouthpiece of infinite miseries and misfortunes that people of the state had to experience, but also as a keen observer of the secret state executions- torture, retention and custodian killings. The story as such is re-telling of the disappearances, tortures in custodian camps as well as state policies towards its people in the political mayhem of nineties. Haleema experienced various vicissitudes in her life that formerly were detrimental to her later ordeal, physical degeneration, psychological breakdown and ultimate death. When the story unfolds, we came to know that she was lone daughter of Ab Jaan and Boba, and from the childhood had to bear all kinds of miseries and disabilities in the backdrop of conflict riddled state of Jammu and Kashmir. First as a child, she was discarded to pursue her academic dreams and later on married to her love interest, but that too twisted into an unsuccessful affair and finally was divorced within the period of three months, with a milestone in her bosom. So, from the beginning of her life, hostile forces seem to confront her agile and energetic nature and later on the tussle between the gun and sword dismantled and shattered her world of infinite dreams. It seems that all the negative forces were directed towards her, disallowing her to realize her unrealized dreams in an apparently hostile world. She has ascended bit by bit, humiliation by humiliation from the depths of familial miseries, to a position where she could have sensed her small space, but the glum of outside world was larger than she could cope with. Her son, Imran, born and brought in the hostile environment of conflict and violence was only hope to survive and cherish her dreams. She took care of him as a wretched manless woman would have done, leaving no stone unturned to instill fatherly love and motherly care to him. During the period of Imran's formative years, Haleema hoped against the hope and dreamed infinite dreams of unrealistic future. But fate had something else stored for her, first, she lost Ab Jaan to the violent bullets of the forces, and when she tried to regain her senses and somehow mustered her courage to fight her battle against the odds, her son disappeared in front of her, into the unknown territory, into the mists of clouds that loomed so low, depriving her of the only hope she had been left with. So, once again compelling her to take refuge in the mind forged manacles. The vast deserts of destruction lie before her, the memories of broken castles and shaken self, tormented her day by day until death.

Thus, the novel as a tour de force is constructed in the backdrop of Kashmir conflict and narrates the story of love and loss, death and destruction, trauma and tragedy that engulfed pure and white, rich and poor in the course of long three decades. The plot of the novel predominantly revolves round the concept of ravages of war and the resultant suffering, pains, pangs and the tragedy of the people. The aspects of experience of trauma can be viewed through different violent acts or scenes Haleema witnessed. She had seen how Ab Jaan was brutally killed; she had also experienced the pains of loss through her lone son's disappearance into the unknown territory. The longing for son as well as the terror of those

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terrified moments still haunt her as nightmares. She didn't fear that now the emissary of death will tear her body apart, but her frozen lips and sealed tongue always wanted not to know the news of Imran's fateful doom.

Discussion:

Trauma studies have gained much currency in past few decades particularly, because the contemporary history is riddled with internecine violence, bloodshed and sudden communal disruptions- the Rohigya crisis, Iraq war, Middle East conflict and Kashmir holocaust. All these disturbances have inflicted trauma to the survivors by not only forming an integral part of their consciousness but also repeatedly rebuilding haunting layers of memory in the unconscious mind. The survivors encounter with any horrific incident leaves strong foot marks on their conscious and unconscious self, thereby splitting their personality into many selves. The memory of these gruesome incidents sinks deep in the mind and torments the witness through nightmares, ghosts and other wretched thoughts of the past. Caruth Cathy, while taking insights from Sigmund Freud, says that trauma is the pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals perplexed by the terrifyingly literal nightmares of battle field survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events. (Cathy, 2)

In light of these insights, the novel *The Half Mother* showcases the actual plight and suffering of Haleema who lost all her dear ones, to the war which benefits none, while being the mute spectator and witness to the events. She, therefore, suffers from both physical tortures as well as mental or psychological agonies which trace and track her always until finally trap her before dying a painful death. The first kind of such horrifying event which shocked her inner self was when she witnessed how Ab Jaan was mercilessly beaten by the security forces:

“Confused and shivering with both rage and fear, Ab Jaan thundered at them, ‘The bunker will be a nuisance—you will always be intruding into our homes. Our women cannot come out of their houses. Please take the bunker a little away from here.’ The trooper with the rifle turned and pushed him back with the butt of his rifle. Ab Jaan fell on the snow and his black karakul hat tilted over his eyes. Imran ran over and helped him stand up.” (Bashir, 26, 27)

The ongoing conflict influenced Haleema's practice of parenting. She has to take extra care to save her child from the harms of turbulent times. So she had to negotiate with geopolitical shifts across the borders. Since, she cannot stay indifferent to violence; the trajectories of geopolitics got intertwined with the practice of parenting, thereby making it harder for single



parent like her to negotiate with circumstances to play her role amidst the outside gloom. The below excerpt reflects the tense situation of nineties as:

“The year 1990. As the insurgency in the valley intensified the government resigned, paving the way for governor’s rule. Tears, blood, death and war followed, as this curfew, crackdowns, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings. . . . Then Shafiq’s daughter Rukhsana became the first woman from the neighbor to be beaten, in her own compound. Her parents were tied with ropes and made to see their daughter being stripped by a trooper. . . . Hundreds of thousands began to march on every street and road in an endless stream of procession. Men, women, children, old young—all . . . The government announced shoot-at-sight order for anyone who defied the curfew. . . . What will happen if the curfew prolongs and my stock runs out? he [Ab Jaan] thought. . . . ‘This curfew doesn’t seem to end. The governor wants us to starve and die in our homes,’ Haleema said.” (Bashir, 32-39)

The prolonged and terrifying disturbances coupled with sheer violence, in Kashmir Valley formed a collective Trauma and thus became the integral part of unconscious. Haleema’s experience and encounters with misfortune and miseries increased with each passing day. The climax of such frightful experiences are reflected when she came across two horrifying events in her life- the day when Ab Jaan was killed in front of her and when Imran was taken into custody by the security forces. While watching the scene of her father’s fateful end, she desires not to know why and how Ab Jaan was mercilessly killed. In her mourning Haleema longs to be re-united with her father, to her small world where she was re-building her shattered dreams. Her inner voice didn’t want to hear the muttering female murmur:

“She wanted to tell the women Ab Jaan is still alive. Isn’t he? 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 own slaps.” (Bashir, 50)

The traumatic experiences have infinite impact on the lives of people who came across such events. According to Caruth Cathy:

“The crisis at the core of many traumatic stories is not escape from reality, the escape from death or from its referential force, but rather the attestation to its endless impact on the life.” (Cathy, 7)



To substantiate Cathy's argument, Haleema did not fear death, but life; she did not either want to die, but an escape from misfortunes, she did not want to know, but rather, not to know the repetition of same story which has inflicted her with infinite wounds on the body as well as on the mind. But the wounds of the mind are not like the wounds of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and the repetitive actions of the survivor. As long as she would internalize the horrific events, so numbered would be her life:

"She lost count of the days that slipped by. Time had stopped for her and she now waited for it to unfreeze itself. With Imran's disappearance, the painful memory of Ab Jaan's death had begun to diminish. One torment eased her out of the other. It seemed as if Ab Jaan had been killed many decades ago."
(Bashir, 80)

Similarly, the double blow- death and disappearance of her father and son compelled Haleema to survive only in the artifice of memory. She does hear voice of Imran in her dreams and chases him like death which chase mortals. Thus, the text, both speak about and speak through the profound traumatic experience of Haleema, rather than straightforwardly describing actual case stories of trauma survivors. In her dream she saw Imran:

"He sits on a bench in Valley Hiardressers, waiting his turn for a haircut. His face is hidden behind a film magazine with two dolphins jumping out of an ice-blue sea on its cover. A barber turns around to call Imran... Haleema enters the shop and tries to persuade Imran to come home. He refuses with a jostle and frees himself as she grasps his arm. 'You didn't look for me in the places where I was,' he tells her. 'Where didn't I look for you, my son? I looked everywhere, I searched for you like a mad woman. In all the places. Everywhere!' Haleema tells him... she woke up, bathed in the sweat, repeatedly muttering, 'I looked for you! I looked for you everywhere...'"
(Bashir, 98, 99)

CONCLUSION:

Thus, it may sense more sensible to assert that literature exemplifies in dealing with the experience of trauma which survivors encounter in the battlefields or in conflict zones of the world. Since trauma represents the ordeal, shock and suffering of mind so does literature which is essentially the record or re-telling of the workings of unconscious. Therefore, Shahnaz Bashir successfully captures the agony, misfortune and the pains of the people who experience traumatic incidents in life. He by making Haleema a mouthpiece of unrecognized



woes and worries of the people living in the turbulent times of Kashmir conflict also gives voice to the widows, half-widows and orphans who are swept across by the great tides of war.

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