

1 **Narrating Traumatic Voices of Women:**

2 A study of Shahnaz Bashirs *The Half Mother* and Farah Bashirs *Rumours of spring*

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29 **Abstract**

30 The political conflicts resulting in the human tragedies continue to find space in the
31 anthologies. As the culture of war dominates, the literature continues to record the sharp

32 perspectives rooted in the personal experiences. Two such works namely *The Half Mother* by
33 Shahnaz Bashir and *The Rumour of spring: A girlhood in Kashmir* by Farah Bashir portray
34 the trauma faced by people of conflict ridden Jammu and Kashmir. Both the novels offer
35 insights into the grim realities of Kashmir and they speak aloud about the trauma faced by
36 women. They portray the miseries and misfortunes that the women encountered daily while
37 living in the blood stained Kashmir in the post 1990's era. This paper is based on these two
38 novels and attempts to inform on the tragic stories of women as told by the authors. The way
39 the writers phrase their experiences and share the pain is analyzed.

40 **Keywords:** Kashmir, women, miseries, catastrophe, turmoil, Oppression, resilience, reality.

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63 **Introduction:**

64 The Indian subcontinent has a history of bloodshed. The nations were born out of partition
65 which concluded with monumental tragedies and unimaginable pain. The fellow citizens
66 massacred each other and the history witnessed the lost humanity. Born out of the same
67 tragedy is Kashmir, a disputed land between two nuclear armed states, India and Pakistan.
68 The political turmoil in Kashmir continued till 1990's when it took a shape of an armed
69 conflict. Thousands of lives were lost and years of time passed under curfews, lockdowns and
70 military siege. Today, Kashmir is the most militarized zone in the world.

71 As the conflict wreaked havoc, the literary people made sure that the experiences are not lost
72 in the thin air. They continue to document the real life tragedies into their work and preserve
73 the heat of the moment for generations to come. In the culture of war, they offer perspectives
74 to inform us about the agony faced by common people. In the same context, the residents of
75 Jammu Kashmir who have borne the brunt of the conflict keep documenting the tragic
76 stories. The recent ones include *'The Half Mother'* by Shahnaz Bashir and *'The Rumors of
77 spring: A girlhood in Kashmir'* by Farah Bashir. These novels eloquently expressed the
78 personal experiences and offered the narration of the life under the conflict. The principal
79 victims of the conflict were Kashmiri women who faced rape, abduction, widowhood, forced
80 disappearances of their loved ones, and whatnot. These novels present the real stories born in
81 Kashmir and reveal the collapse of families, devastation of youth and the struggle for survival
82 and existence of the people in the land under the military boots.

83 **Discussion:**

84 When the story of *The Half Mother* unfolds, we came to know that Haleema is the lone
85 daughter of Ab Jaan and Boba, and who from childhood had to bear all sorts of miseries in
86 the backdrop of conflict riddled state of Jammu and Kashmir. She was born and brought up in
87 abduct poverty and was forced to bid adieu to her dreams of schooling too early. She got
88 married to her love, but that too brought her nothing but agony and pain. She was divorced
89 within three months of her marriage, with a milestone in her bosom named Imran.

90 *"She was a mother and a daughter yesterday, a 'half mother' and an orphan today"* (The
91 Half Mother).

92 Thus, from the beginning of her life, hostile forces confronted her agile and energetic nature.
93 Later the tussle between the gun and sword shattered her world of infinite dreams. During the
94 period of Imran's formative years, Haleema hoped against hope and fancied infinite dreams
95 of an idealistic future. But fate had its plans for her. She lost Ab Jaan to the bullets of the
96 force too early. When she regained her senses and mustered the courage to fight her battle
97 against the odds, her son disappeared, into the unknown territory, into the mists of clouds,
98 depriving her of the only hope she had been growing grey with. From this part of the novel,
99 Haleema battles for answers—narrating her brief and full version, she visits every police
100 station, every military cum torture camp, and politicians for help. But she was devastated to
101 not find any ray of hope for the return of her son. Nevertheless, she never got disappointed.
102 She kept on waiting and lost herself in the memory of her son. "I have to keep hoping I
103 cannot be defeated like this. I cannot lose him like this. I have to go home and keep waiting.
104 Yes. That is the only thing I have to do" (The Half Mother, 154).

105 Frustrated and tired after long waiting, Haleema dies uttering:

106 *"Imran saebaAakha*

107 *Imran. Have you come*” (The Half Mother, 178)

108 Though she had been living a life of hope about the return of her son, she was turning aged
109 and getting weak. Looking into her aged face, in the mirror, one day, she lost herself in the
110 deep slumber and saw Imran visiting her—tired, ragged and silent. Nonetheless, it was a
111 dream that every half-mother in Kashmir had.

112 Haleema represents the womenfolk’s from Kashmir and The Half Mother depicts their
113 individual as well as collective trauma. It reflects the situation of every mother who lost her
114 son in the frenzy of war. This traumatic life makes these half widows and half mothers the
115 central victim of the conflict zone. However, while coping with trauma, these women become
116 too resilient enough to defy all obstacles that came their way and tried to cope with the
117 hostile circumstances with the hope that one day they will meet their loved ones.

118 Similar to Shahnaz Bashir’s The Half Mother, Farah Bashir’s Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood
119 in Kashmir is also a heart breaking narrative. It is a terrifying yet tender account of a girlhood
120 spent under the constant siege. Bashir writes this novel from the perspective of an adolescent
121 girl who has suffered both materially and emotionally. She is not just a mere spectator of a
122 conflict of wrecked Kashmir for 30 years but has experienced every bit of it. She is herself its
123 victim. The Rumours of Spring begins with two deaths: one real, that of Bobeh— the
124 Protagonists grandmother, and the other figurative that is Farah’s adolescence.

125 Farah Bashir has written this novel chapter wise. Chapter after chapter, page after page, she
126 juxtaposes the moments of breath taking beauty in an extremely remarkable memoir of life
127 and love under military occupation. Interestingly the chapters of Rumours of Spring follow
128 the different phases of the day of Bobeh’s funeral under the subtopics of “Evening, Night,
129 Early Hours, Dawn, Morning, and Afterlife”. Every chapter focuses on different facets of
130 Bashir's life. How her life transformed in the Valley from 1990 onwards when destruction,
131 firing, curfew, and barbed wires were the order of the day. Her story is not her alone but of
132 dozens of people she has been associated with and whose lives were enmeshed in the political
133 conflict and turned upside down. It includes her grandmother, Bobeh, who is the moving
134 spirit behind the book, and the repeated exposure to teargases in the valley worsened her
135 asthma and she died. Her story also includes Rajj Mas, who is a practiced funeral bather, who
136 also became the victim of the conflict. Her son was forcibly disappeared by the government
137 forces, never to return home again; and another character is Vaseem, who is Bashir’s, first
138 love.

139 With haunting simplicity, Farah Bashir captures moments of her girlhood. On one evening in
140 the summer of 1989 when she and her sister went to the salon for the very first time to give a
141 glamorous look to her lush hair what happened was that;

142 “*We were among the last few customers at the Salon. By the time we left, it was already dark,*
143 *but we noticed a marked shift in the air that had nothing to do with the inky, funeral colour of*
144 *the evening sky. Shopkeepers were bringing down the store shutters in frenzy. Instead of the*
145 *pre-Eid festive chaos caused by the shopkeepers alike, the road began emptying. Police*
146 *vehicles were whizzing past us and there were policemen all around*” (Rumours of the
147 spring, 6).

148 She and her sister were caught in the grip of sudden violence, followed by a curfew and the
149 pronouncements by the government forces in the jeeps, that ‘*Awaamsaiapeel ki*

150 *jatyhaiapnegharunmairahain'* People are appealed not to step out of their houses, for there
151 was shoot at sight order all across the city. Back at home Bobeh was breathing laboriously
152 because of the rumours that 'Farah is dead'. Farah was in a daze and was unable to
153 understand what was happening and started cursing herself by plucking the chunk of hair
154 from her head to punish herself that if she could not have gone to the salon this incident
155 would not have happened. And then consciously or subconsciously this became her habit for
156 coping with the stress of living in a landscape bursting with grief, fear and anxiety. "*As this*
157 *young girl grows into adulthood amidst traumatic conflict, the painful act of plucking out*
158 *strands of hair from her scalp turned her only means of comfort. With this horrifying image,*
159 *Farah Bashir takes the reader down her memory lane, narrating vignettes that are both*
160 *refreshing and heartbreaking"* (Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal).

161 By the time when 'Farah' reached the age of adolescence, when hair on her upper lips started
162 growing up, when she wanted to lower her socks to the ankles and to shave her legs to feel
163 grown up and somewhat feminine, the Salons had already been shut down. Also by this time,
164 the hardliner faction, headed by women, had already promulgated the Islamic codes for
165 women by promoting a certain modest way of living, and ordered girls and women to cover
166 their heads with scarves. She attempted to escape the strict Islamic dress code but dreaded
167 when her friend was attacked with acid on the busiest road and equally militarized areas of
168 the city because she was wearing jeans and her head was uncovered. This terrific incident
169 became a warning for all the girls and to the author too. She radically changed; and made
170 herself invisible, less attractive, by not washing her face for days and plucking her hair
171 strands to look less pleasant. She didn't want to look attractive at all because of the forces
172 stationed everywhere on the streets. She didn't want to invite the lecherous gaze of men on
173 the streets. She didn't want to be the victim of an acid attack like her friend. She wanted to
174 look ugly so that men would not look at her. This is how Bashir describes the anxieties faced
175 by Kashmiri women while living close to the troops and the resilience of her girlhood amidst
176 the increasing trauma and turmoil.

177 "*After 1989, it didn't feel like we lived in the same house, especially at night. All the bright*
178 *light replaced with zero-watt bulbs, which made the passages visible, hence walkable"*
179 (Rumour of the spring; 70)

180 While describing the Night, It talks about how life changed from 1989 onwards in Kashmir.
181 How massacres, curfew, night curfews, concertina wires etc. became part of life and how the
182 carefree circumstances of the time before 1989 had turned into ghosts. As always, with any
183 conflict, women and children are always the subjects of multiple jeopardies. In this chapter,
184 she reveals her physical and emotional suffering of nights after 1989 which every girl child
185 has to face in the conflict-ridden zone. She talks about her period pangs, sleepless nights and
186 sufferings which she used to endure for couple of days in a month. In the dark nights when
187 pain was severe and intolerable, her anticipation of the day to break was the only wish to
188 come true. There were nights when she didn't dare to take a trip to the toilet or to the living
189 room in order to get the medicine just for the reason that the creaking staircase would attract
190 dangers for the family because the night curfews had been imposed and it was not possible to
191 move about anywhere in the house without causing alarm because houses were made of
192 woods even tiptoeing noise could travel outside and can alert the troops to barge into the
193 house. So the pain had to be borne silently without attempting to find ways to alleviate it.
194 She used to lie quietly on her bed and cry during the elongated nights than attract the danger

195 to the family. This is how Bashir gives the reader a sense that how difficult it is to live in a
196 zone where a person can't get painkillers just from a floor below the bedroom.

197 The next chapter titled, The Country with a Burnt Post Office, talks about the heart-
198 wrenching love story that tragically burns along with the only possible way of
199 communication between the two lovers was the Post Office. She plaintively calls her break-
200 up with her lover "*neither painful nor acrimonious*" but "*a romance that was cut by fire*"
201 (Shambhavi Siddhi).

202 "*I don't know when I will post these letters to you. I might have to hand these over when you*
203 *are back and if we meet when you are home. I'll tell you about the rest when we meet if we*
204 *meet. What if they impose curfews again when you are home? I hate curfews. I want to pick*
205 *the petals of a flower. I wish I could pick the petals and play that stupid game they show in*
206 *films, he loves me, and he loves me not*" (Rumour of the spring; 69).

207 She used to write letters via mail until the post office in Srinagar caught fire, which was their
208 only means of communication. "*Gates of memory never close how much I miss you nobody*
209 *knows*" (Rumours of the spring, 67). In a turmoil-ridden Valley, no one restored the burnt up
210 and dysfunctional mailbox, as a result of which both of them lost contact and the exchanging
211 of love letters with a young man was brutally interrupted and never resumed.

212 **Conclusion:**

213 The careful reading of both the novels reveals that the authors not only have succeeded in
214 bringing the Kashmir catastrophe to the forefront, but also aptly rooted the fateful tale and
215 intermingled it in the socio-cultural milieu of the last decade of the 20th century Kashmir to
216 vividly picturize the bloodshed, pains and pangs of the people. Going through the pages and
217 chapters of both the novels makes us wonder about the tyrannies which were inflicted on old
218 and young, women and children alike. Therefore, it sounds more sensible to assert that
219 literature exemplifies dealing with the experience of trauma which survivors encounter on the
220 battlefields or conflict zones of the world. Since trauma represents the ordeal, shock and
221 suffering of the mind so does literature which is essentially the record or re-telling of the
222 workings of the unconscious. Therefore, both the authors have successfully captured the
223 agony, misfortune and pains of the people who experience traumatic incidents in life.
224 Shahnaz by making Haleema a mouthpiece of unrecognized woes and worries of the people
225 and Farah gives her own experiences while living in the turbulent times of the Kashmir
226 conflict.

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