

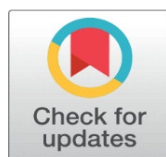
THE HALF MOTHER: AN INQUIRY INTO THE POETICS OF RESISTANCE LITERATURE

Dr. Joji John Panicker ¹, Dr. Ancy Elezabeth John ², Dr. Saran S. ³

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, CMS College Kottayam, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Christian College, Chengannur, India

³ Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, University Institute of Technology, University Regional Centre – Pathiyoor, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. Saran S., srn.s@rediffmail.com

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ABSTRACT

“The Half Mother: An Inquiry into the Poetics of Resistance Literature” investigates the dynamic interplay between literary representation and political resistance in the context of the Kashmir conflict. This paper delves into how Shahnaz Bashir's novel, *The Half Mother*, exemplifies the genre of resistance literature by exploring the intersection of personal and collective trauma amidst a protracted conflict. The Kashmir Valley, historically a cradle of poetic and artistic expression, has faced profound devastation since the late 1980s due to a surge in violence and insurgency. This period, marked by intense militarization and human rights abuses, has given rise to a distinct body of English-language literature that seeks to authentically portray the lived experiences of its people.

The study situates *The Half Mother* within the broader framework of resistance literature, drawing on Ghassan Kanafani's theoretical construct of resistance as both a cultural and political act. This study demonstrates how these literary efforts transcend mere chronicles of victimhood to engage in a profound examination of human resilience and the quest for self-determination. Bashir's novel thus emerges as a pivotal text that not only contributes to the international literary discourse but also amplifies the voices of a marginalized and silenced population. *The Half Mother* encapsulates the transformation of individual suffering into a collective resistance, shedding light on the intrinsic link between literary creation and political struggle, and offering a poignant commentary on the enduring human spirit amidst adversity.

Keywords: Resistance Literature, Kashmir Conflict, Resilience and Political Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

Kashmir has remained a disputed region since the failure of its former ruler, Raja Hari Singh, to effectively resolve the issue of its accession to either India or Pakistan during the partition. The unrest in the Valley began in the late 1980s, marked by the eruption of violence and insurgency that resulted in the military occupation of Kashmir. Since then, numerous allegations have been made against the army regarding the misuse of the provisions under the Armed Forces Act, leading to widespread human rights abuses.

The contentious historical and political interpretations of the Kashmir conflict have engendered numerous scholarly and creative responses across both literary

and non-literary domains. This protracted conflict is frequently viewed as a battleground for competing hegemonies—namely, Indian and Pakistani. Predominantly, the literature emanating from these divergent perspectives tends to produce singular and often reductive portrayals of the conflict's multifaceted realities.

With the emergence of numerous indigenous voices, particularly within the literary sphere, we are witnessing fresh perspectives that seek to authentically represent the lived experiences of the Kashmir conflict, thereby challenging established narratives. Notably, recent years have seen the publication of several significant novels that have garnered international attention, including Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* and *The Book of Gold Leaves*, Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* and *The Scattered Souls*, and Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*.

Emerging English fiction from Kashmir is increasingly overcoming longstanding isolation and cognitive constraints to become a voice for those who have been historically marginalized. Contemporary English writers, both within Kashmir and beyond, are not merely documenting the interplay between fact and fiction but are also demonstrating exceptional moral courage and intellectual integrity. These new narratives function as historiographies that sensitively illuminate previously obscured or unarticulated aspects of the Kashmir conflict, thereby highlighting a human story that has long been neglected. These literary works stem from the harsh realities of armed struggle and conflict, yet they convey a rich diversity of perspectives and dimensions prompted by the Kashmir conflict. Far from being mere chronicles of victimhood, their strength lies in their capacity to testify to the enduring essence of humanity, a hallmark of great literature. Such writings defy reduction to mere "literature of protest" or "literature of propaganda," as some critics might assert. Instead, they exemplify the profound capacity of literature to reflect deeply on the human condition at specific historical junctures.

2. THE HALF MOTHER: A REFLECTION OF KASHMIR

The armed conflict in Kashmir epitomizes a grievous reality for India, subjecting countless individuals to profound suffering. Shahnaz Bashir, an emerging indigenous voice from Kashmir, garnered the Muse India Young Writer Award in 2015 for his debut novel *The Half Mother*. This work provides a fresh perspective on the Kashmir conflict through literary imagination, aiming to illuminate the hardships endured by Kashmiris under military oppression.

Bashir's narrative zeroes in on the severe impact of the conflict on Kashmiri women, particularly those afflicted by the enforced disappearance of their relatives. By depicting Haleema's life, Bashir offers a vivid portrayal of the arduous existence faced by Kashmiris amidst the relentless toll of militancy. Set against the backdrop of the 1990s-armed uprising against Indian rule, the novel chronicles a period of intense strife marked by curfews, crackdowns, raids, and widespread violence. As described by Bashir, the insurgency's escalation led to the imposition of governor's rule and precipitated a cycle of tears, bloodshed, and destruction (Bashir, 32).

The narrative poignantly captures Haleema's existential despair, her loathing of her own consciousness, and her profound wish for death. As a representative of countless Kashmiri women, Haleema's plight is exacerbated by the intrusive presence of the Indian army, reflecting a broader phenomenon of pervasive suffering in Kashmir since the partition of India and Pakistan. The special powers wielded by the army have become a profound curse, leading to gross violations of fundamental human rights.

Bashir's novel portrays the harrowing experiences of numerous families subjected to brutality, including Ghulam Rasool Joo, Haleema's father, and her son Imran, who is forcibly taken by the authorities and disappears into the abyss of Kashmir's missing persons. The story also includes Shafiq's sons, Shaheen Bhat, a distinguished student, and Imran Bhat, a talented footballer, who both fled to Pakistan. Rukhsana, Shafiq's daughter, endured public humiliation by the troops, while Shabeer Ahmad was fatally shot by the army for refusing to remove a Pakistani flag. Ramzan Dar's ripe paddy was incinerated when he resisted army demands. These grim episodes from Natipora, located just three kilometers from Srinagar's Lal Chowk, starkly contrast with the idyllic image of Kashmir as "Paradise on Earth."

The novel underscores the pervasive issue of enforced disappearances during the 1990s, centering on Haleema's son Imran's abduction by the Indian army—a tragic motif emblematic of the broader conflict. Despite his lack of involvement in militancy, Imran's arrest epitomizes the arbitrary and brutal practices inflicted upon Kashmiris by the state apparatus. In the narrative, this state-sponsored violence is personified by Major Aman Lal Kushwaha, who symbolizes the repressive force of the Indian military against the Kashmiri populace.

3. POETICS OF RESISTANCE LITERATURE

The term "Resistance," etymologically derived from the Latin *resistere*, meaning "to stand firm," denotes a range of vigorous efforts aimed at opposing and challenging oppressive forces. Kashmiri literature represents a contemporary manifestation of resistance literature within India, with the objective of illuminating the systemic oppression endured by Kashmiris in their homeland.

The Half Mother exemplifies resistance literature by addressing issues of human rights violations, identity crises, existential struggles, injustice and oppression— dimensions often overlooked in mainstream literary portrayals of Kashmir. This narrative provides a distinct and multifaceted perspective, contrasting with other literary works that may omit fundamental truths about the Kashmiri experience.

In the realm of literary theory, the concept of "resistance" (*muqawamah*) was initially articulated by Palestinian writer, critic, and martyr Ghassan Kanafani in his seminal study *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. Kanafani posits that resistance, while often associated with armed struggle, fundamentally arises from a deeper desire for liberation. He asserts that such a desire is a natural, logical, and essential outcome of resistance in its broadest sense—both as a refusal to accept oppression and as a commitment to preserving cultural and situational roots. Kanafani emphasizes that the cultural dimension of resistance holds equal significance to armed resistance itself (Harlow, 11).

The core assertion of Resistance Literature is unequivocal: literature serves as a crucial "arena of struggle" for those pursuing liberation from oppressive colonial regimes through armed resistance. In contexts of trauma and oppression, a literary voice of dissent is recognized as a form of resistance. Shahnaz Bashir's novel *The Half Mother* exemplifies resistance literature through its depiction of emotional upheaval translating into powerful protests. Bashir's narrative provides a poignant exploration of the plight of Kashmiri mothers whose suffering is overshadowed by the progress of Kashmir's socio-economic and political landscape. The character of Haleema symbolizes resistance through her relentless quest to uncover the fates of countless Kashmiris who have been arbitrarily detained by the authorities. Her credible portrayal, marked by genuine pain and unwavering bravery, imbues hope

in her struggle against militancy. Haleema represents the myriad of mothers who have lost their sons to conflict, and in the face of exploitation, *The Half Mother* ignites a beacon of resistance, illuminating the struggles of Bashir's people.

In *The Half Mother*, the growing awareness of systemic oppression galvanizes the Kashmiri populace to unite in resistance against the army. The atrocities inflicted upon Shafiq's family and Ramzaan Dar serve as catalysts, prompting widespread mobilization for peaceful coexistence within their homeland. As Bashir depicts, "Hundreds of thousands began to march on every street and road in an endless stream of processions. Men, women, children, old, young—all. Their green headbands, the banners they brandished, the flags they waved, the placards they held, the slogans they shouted and painted on the walls repeated the same word over and over: *Azaadi*" (Bashir, 32). This fervent pursuit of liberation significantly diminishes their fear of persecution, with Kashmiris increasingly willing to confront the risks of violence, injury, or imprisonment by Indian forces.

In this novel, education emerges as a vital tool for survival. AbJaan's efforts to educate his son Imran symbolize a strategy to foster resistance against oppression through cultural empowerment. Imran's eagerness to learn about Kashmir's history—excluded from Indian narratives—underscores the drive for self-awareness as a form of resistance. He questions, "How can one study about Mesopotamia and Indus Valley and Harappa and this and that civilization but not a bit about the place one hails from?" (Bashir, 34). This pursuit of self-knowledge aims to mitigate the effects of subjugation. AbJaan's initiative to provide alternative education during curfews reflects an attempt to circumvent suppression and uphold intellectual resilience.

Haleema, the protagonist, embodies the resistance of countless Kashmiri mothers. Although her protest under ARDP banner might seem futile, her struggle continues as she represents all those affected by the conflict. She asserts, "I am not struggling for my son now but for all those who have disappeared" (Bashir, 164). Shahnaz Bashir's perspective aligns with the view that serious literature itself constitutes a form of resistance. According to Bashir, writing inherently challenges prevailing norms and conformism. The tumultuous social conditions in Kashmir have prompted indigenous writers to address their experiences of militancy within the framework of resistance literature.

Bashir's novel, like that of his contemporaries, aims to achieve this within the context of Kashmir's historically charged environment. This approach aligns with Ghassan Kanafani's assertion that resistance literature rejects mere sentimentalism, emerging instead with a profound sadness that accurately reflects the realities of the situation. Such literature resonates with the nationalist aspirations of struggling Kashmiris and seeks to reclaim lost historical narratives. In this regard, *The Half Mother* amplifies the voices and aspirations of a marginalized people, casting light on their silenced experiences through literary imagination.

4. CONCLUSION

During the 1980s, Indian Fiction in English saw the emergence of a new generation of writers who utilized their creative prowess to explore contemporary realities and articulate the experiences of previously marginalized communities and regions. These authors adeptly employed symbols, imagery, and various literary techniques to highlight specific aspects of Indian societal patterns. Frequently, their works grapple with the tension between tradition and innovation.

Among these pioneering voices are several notable figures from Kashmir, including Shahnaz Bashir, Mirza Waheed, Basharat Peer, Siddhartha Gigoo, and Shafi Ahmad. The literary landscape of post-1990 Kashmir is marked by narratives of trauma and suffering, which emerged in the wake of political dissent being suppressed following the rigged elections of 1989. This period witnessed a surge in violence, including arbitrary killings, arson, arrests, disappearances, and widespread terror, which came to define the region's experience.

The recurrent unrest and violence in the subsequent years catalyzed a new phase of resistance and simultaneously enriched the literary output of Kashmir's young English writers. These events not only plunged Kashmir, once deemed the "paradise of the East," into a state of ongoing turmoil but also transformed the discourse and language of its literary narratives. Literature is inherently shaped by the societal and circumstantial contexts from which it emerges.

In the post-1990 corpus of Kashmir English fiction, prevalent themes include the lullabies of pain and the harrowing narratives of oppression. Both native and diaspora Kashmiri writers have shifted their perception from seeing the vibrancy of red roses to witnessing blood-soaked petals amidst the Mughal gardens of Srinagar. Historically, Kashmir has been a haven for poets, writers, and artists, offering an ideal setting for intellectual and creative pursuits. The region has produced distinguished literary figures who have not only enriched regional literature but also garnered international recognition.

However, the recent era of violence has wrought profound devastation, marked by substantial loss of life and economic ruin. Militants have perpetrated severe human rights violations, including summary executions, rape, and torture. The exodus of tens of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits is a direct consequence of this violence, further contributing to the widespread psychological trauma within Kashmiri society. This ongoing strife has reduced daily life to a relentless cycle of lamentation and suffering.

Despite these adversities, resistance emerges as a potent force, exemplified by Haleema, a courageous protagonist who establishes the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Persons. Haleema's resolute quest to find her missing son Imran transforms her from a psychologically burdened individual into a historical agent actively engaged in resistance. Her narrative not only amplifies her personal struggle but also represents the perspectives of various Kashmiri individuals—children, fathers, sons, daughters, mothers, and wives—alongside the oppressive forces. These diverse viewpoints collectively illustrate the multifaceted historical experience of the Kashmiri people.

The Half Mother offers a profoundly evocative portrayal of ordinary civilians entangled in a conflict they neither sought nor endorse, centering on the unyielding struggle of an individual woman as she battles for her survival. The novel underscores the exploitation faced by civilians from various authorities, including the denial of justice by the State Human Rights Commission. The systemic inequities exacerbate the anguish throughout the journey of life. Nevertheless, this pervasive sense of powerlessness is interspersed with a resilient streak of defiance—one nurtured by decades of suffering, trauma, and oppression.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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