



| RESEARCH ARTICLE

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NARRATING TRAUMATIC VOICES OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF SHAHNAZ BASHIRS THE HALF MOTHER AND FARAH BASHIRS RUMOURS OF SPRING

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| ABSTRACT

The political conflicts resulting in the human tragedies continue to find space in the anthologies. As the culture of war dominates, the literature continues to record the sharp perspectives rooted in the personal experiences. Two such works namely The Half Mother by Shahnaz Bashir and The Rumour of spring:

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Kashmir, women, miseries, catastrophe, turmoil, Oppression, resilience, reality.

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Abstract

The political conflicts resulting in the human tragedies continue to find space in the anthologies. As the culture of war dominates, the literature continues to record the sharp perspectives rooted in the personal experiences. Two such works namely The Half Mother by Shahnaz Bashir and The Rumour of spring: A girlhood in Kashmir by Farah Bashir portray the trauma faced by people of conflict ridden Jammu and Kashmir. Both the novels offer insights into the grim realities of Kashmir and they speak aloud about the trauma faced by women. They portray the miseries and misfortunes that the women encountered daily while living in the blood stained Kashmir in the post 1990's era. This paper is based on these two novels and attempts to inform on the tragic stories of women as told by the authors. The way the writers phrase their experiences and share the pain is analyzed.

Introduction:-

The Indian subcontinent has a history of bloodshed. The nations were born out of partition which concluded with monumental tragedies and unimaginable pain. The fellow citizens massacred each other and the history witnessed the lost humanity. Born out of the same tragedy is Kashmir, a disputed land between two nuclear armed states, India and Pakistan. The political turmoil in Kashmir continued till 1990's when it took a shape of an armed conflict. Thousands of lives were lost and years of time passed under curfews, lockdowns and military siege. Today, Kashmir is the most militarized zone in the world. As the conflict wreaked havoc, the literary people made sure that the experiences are not lost in the thin air. They continue to document the real life tragedies into their work and preserve the heat of the moment for generations to come. In the culture of war, they offer perspectives to inform us about the agony faced by common people. In the same context, the residents of Jammu Kashmir who have borne the brunt of the conflict keep documenting the tragic stories. The recent ones include 'The Half Mother' by Shahnaz Bashir and 'The Rumors of spring: A girlhood in Kashmir' by Farah Bashir. These novels eloquently expressed the personal experiences and offered the narration of the life under the conflict. The principal victims of the conflict were Kashmiri

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women who faced rape, abduction, widowhood, forced disappearances of their loved ones, and whatnot. These novels present the real stories born in Kashmir and reveal the collapse of families, devastation of youth and the struggle for survival and existence of the people in the land under the military boots.

Discussion:-

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

“She was a mother and a daughter yesterday, a ‘half mother’ and an orphan today” (The Half Mother):-

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

“Imran saebaAakha:-

Imran. Have you come” (The Half Mother, 178):-

Though she had been living a life of hope about the return of her son, she was turning aged and getting weak. Looking into her aged face, in the mirror, one day, she lost herself in the deep slumber and saw Imran visiting her—tired, ragged and silent. Nonetheless, it was a dream that every half-mother in Kashmir had. Haleema represents the womenfolk’s from Kashmir and *The Half Mother* depicts their individual as well as collective trauma. It reflects the situation of every mother who lost her son in the frenzy of war. This traumatic life makes these half widows and half mothers the central victim of the conflict zone. However, while coping with trauma, these women become too resilient enough to defy all obstacles that came their way and tried to cope with the hostile circumstances with the hope that one day they will meet their loved ones. Similar to Shahnaz Bashir’s *The Half Mother*, Farah Bashir’s *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* is also a heart breaking narrative. It is a terrifying yet tender account of a girlhood spent under the constant siege. Bashir writes this novel from the perspective of an adolescent girl who has suffered both materially and emotionally. She is not just a mere spectator of a conflict of wrecked Kashmir for 30 years but has experienced every bit of it. She is herself its victim. *The Rumours of Spring* begins with two deaths: one real, that of Bobeh—the Protagonists grandmother, and the other figurative that is Farah’s adolescence.

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

With haunting simplicity, Farah Bashir captures moments of her girlhood. On one evening in the summer of 1989 when she and her sister went to the salon for the very first time to give a glamorous look to her lush hair what happened was that; “We were among the last few customers at the Salon. By the time we left, it was already dark, but we noticed a marked shift in the air that had nothing to do with the inky, funeral colour of the evening sky. Shopkeepers were bringing down the store shutters in frenzy. Instead of the pre-Eid festive chaos caused by the shopkeepers alike, the road began emptying. Police vehicles were whizzing past us and there were policemen all around” (*Rumours of the spring*, 6). She and her sister were caught in the grip of sudden violence, followed by a curfew and the pronouncements by the government forces in the jeeps, that ‘Awaamsaiapeel ki jatyaiahapnegharunmairahain’ People are appealed not to step out of their houses, for there was shoot at sight order all across the city. Back at home Bobeh was breathing laboriously because of the rumours that ‘Farah is dead’. Farah was in a daze and

was unable to understand what was happening and started cursing herself by plucking the chunk of hair from her head to punish herself that if she could not have gone to the salon this incident would not have happened. And then consciously or subconsciously this became her habit for coping with the stress of living in a landscape bursting with grief, fear and anxiety. “As this young girl grows into adulthood amidst traumatic conflict, the painful act of plucking out strands of hair from her scalp turned her only means of comfort. With this horrifying image, Farah Bashir takes the reader down her memory lane, narrating vignettes that are both refreshing and heartbreaking” (Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal).

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

“After 1989, it didn’t feel like we lived in the same house, especially at night. All the bright light replaced with zero-watt bulbs, which made the passages visible, hence walkable” (Rumour of the spring; 70) While describing the Night, It talks about how life changed from 1989 onwards in Kashmir. How massacres, curfew, night curfews, concertina wires etc. became part of life and how the carefree circumstances of the time before 1989 had turned into ghosts. As always, with any conflict, women and children are always the subjects of multiple jeopardies. In this chapter, she reveals her physical and emotional suffering of nights after 1989 which every girl child has to face in the conflict-ridden zone. She talks about her period pangs, sleepless nights and sufferings which she used to endure for couple of days in a month. In the dark nights when pain was severe and intolerable, her anticipation of the day to break was the only wish to come true. There were nights when she didn’t dare to take a trip to the toilet or to the living room in order to get the medicine just for the reason that the creaking staircase would attract dangers for the family because the night curfews had been imposed and it was not possible to move about anywhere in the house without causing alarm because houses were made of woods even tiptoeing noise could travel outside and can alert the troops to barge into the house. So the pain had to be borne silently without attempting to find ways to alleviate it. She used to lie quietly on her bed and cry during the elongated nights than attract the danger to the family. This is how Bashir gives the reader a sense that how difficult it is to live in a zone where a person can’t get painkillers just from a floor below the bedroom. The next chapter titled, The Country with a Burnt Post Office, talks about the heart-wrenching love story that tragically burns along with the only possible way of communication between the two lovers was the Post Office. She plaintively calls her break-up with her lover “neither painful nor acrimonious” but “a romance that was cut by fire” (Shambhavi Siddhi).

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

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

Conclusion:-

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

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