

Disappearance, Delusion and Disappointment: Salma, a Victim of Conflict in Shafi Ahmad's *The Half Widow*

Mohd Nageen Rather

Indra Gandhi National Open University
Regional Centre Sgr. (J&K)
rathernageen7@gmail.com.

The unresolved age-old Jammu & Kashmir conflict has resulted in bloodshed, killings, beatings, disappearances and other untold atrocities and miseries, of the people including the misfortune that befell the women whose husbands have disappeared without a trace. The conflict has produced many 'half-widows' whose husbands have disappeared but are not declared deceased. Since their husbands are not confirmed dead, they are officially not considered widows. Instead, they are seen as "half-widows". Thousands of husbands in Kashmir disappeared during the conflict leaving their wives in miserable conditions. Though the wives of these husbands leave no stone unturned in locating their husband but often the pursuit ends in hopelessness and they return without any clue. Their existence becomes meaningless and purposeless. They face the hardships which they never imagined in the wildest of their dreams. The conflict tears their life apart. They lose their dignity and identity. Many novels have depicted the plight of these women and their struggle to cope with life. But Shafi Ahmad in his novel *The Half Widow* (2012) has dealt with the issue in a realistic and unique way depicting how these women survive and in the search for their missing better-halves how they are consumed by the social taboos and trauma.

The present study shows how Salma is devoured and victimised pushed into the quagmire of miseries, representing the other thousands of women facing the same fate in the conflict-torn land.

Half-widow is a term given to Kashmiri women whose husbands have disappeared and were still missing during the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. These women are called "half-widows" because they have no idea whether their husbands are dead or alive. Thousands of husbands in Kashmir disappeared during the conflict. Most of the half-widows have not remarried due to doubt about their husband's fate. Wives of disappeared men often face various socio-economic and emotional uncertainties. Since most of the disappeared men are from rural Kashmir, these widows usually live impoverished lives. "Recently, the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) reported that there are between 2,000 – 2,500 half-widows in the Kashmir valley...Property rights for half-widows are difficult to get as these processes require death certificate of their husband which they generally do not get as their husbands are officially not recognised as deceased." [U.Baba/ Al Jazeera :2013]The biggest dilemma faced by the half

widows is that in the absence of their bread winners, they have to rely on their in-laws or parents for their economic need with their property and custody rights undetermined. Shafi Ahmad takes us to the Kashmir of late 80's early 90's. It was in Kashmir where torture, killings, rapes, abductions, forced disappearances was a norm. In 90's, everything was happening dramatically in this otherwise quiet-heaven on the earth. This was the time, when some Kashmiris (breaking away from their past) had taken recourse to armed struggle, to get their independence. Shafi Ahmad's *The Half Widow* is an important addition to the handful of historical novels that have portrayed the troublesome lives, in recent times, of the residents in the picturesque state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). It is tale of a Kashmiri woman whose happy life takes a drastic turn as her husband is made to disappear and depicts her struggle as a half- widow.

The violence that has marred Kashmir, particularly since the onset of the armed insurgency and counter-insurgency in 1989, has produced some 20,000 widows and 1500 'half widows'. The latter are a haunting reminder of the thousands of married Kashmiri men reported 'missing' or 'forced into disappearance' either by the security forces or militant organisations. Their wives live a liminal, marginal and socially condemned life. They do not know whether their husbands are alive or dead, and even if they are assumed dead, they have no "proof" of this. Coupled with the painful and endless wait for their husbands and for justice, the life of a half widow is often much worse than that of a widow. This psychological vulnerability experienced by half widows, and their sad plight is powerfully conveyed through the novel *The Half Widow*, by Shafi Ahmad, which is the reflection of Kashmir valley and touches a significant contemporary issues.

The novel, amid all the inhumane crimes, specifically details the crimes against women of Kashmir depicting how they were systematically used as weapons of war, or victims of weapon. Suggesting how deeply such crimes are etched in the collective psyche of Kashmiris.

It is the novel, which 'responds to Kashmir agony' (Edward Said's on *The Country without Post Office*). The novel begins, showing a woman scrubbing pots and pans in a kitchen late at night. Her son questions the reason for their move from the village to the city, where the life is so different and the family she works for takes their dinner so late. The novel proceeds to depict the plight of the half-widows [women whose husband have disappeared and cannot be traced] Ahmad portrays struggle of a widow, Salma, of frontier Kupwara district whose husbands, Aslam, gets disappeared once upon a time in Kashmir. She goes from pillar to post in search of him but finds no light at the end of the tunnel and finally lives by compromise. On a fateful evening, her husband is taken away by some unknown gun-toddlers never to be seen

again. The mother of three then starts an arduous search for her husband. She fears he exists no more, but her love mocks her at the mere thought. “Caught between her children and a missing husband she is victimized all the way round.”

(R.Aman:2012) Salma continues to tread one mountain after the other.

Shafi Ahmad has used the tools of a historical fiction novelist, admirably, to blend in the story of a fictional half-widow, Salma, with real events that occur around her and affect her profoundly. Her husband, Aslam, is taken away one night by gunmen, while waiting at a bus stop, in a car without number plates. Later, Salma is informed that someone saw Aslam in the district jail. It is not clear why Aslam was imprisoned, for he was a government worker and not a militant. He lived in a decent house and even owned a car. He was well liked by others and had once rescued his neighbor from being beaten up by a gang of militants who considered him to be a Mukhbir – a police informant.

Shafi dextrously presents “how a household, craving family life, was sliced and scattered into pieces. With each part living and longing for the other, a family like many others doomed by the fate and damned by their society.” (T. Irfan:2013) While the mother, doing all the menial work (to survive herself for the day she could tell her children, there Abu is back), her children fit only for the yateem khanas (orphanages), dotted throughout ‘their’ valley.

It is easy to perceive that the blameless Kashmiri’s are caught between the militants and the police warring factions. Salma is among the guiltless. As her husband disappears, she is left without any income. The government refuses to pay her the missing Aslam’s wages. The novel renders empathetically the endearing love of a woman for her husband. Salma’s efforts and the sacrifices she makes in attempting to locate her husband, would bring tears to many readers’ eyes.

Athar Zia rightly says “Women amidst the mayhem have been equal recipients in the suffering”. (K Lit) Various researches shows that most of such women of Kashmir in fact believe that physical, sexual and mental harassment is a part of their fate, and do not seek help, even though, most of the women indicated mental disorders, and being continuously depressed. “The background and the events surrounding Salma’s life and her quest for locating Aslam are told from the point of view of numerous characters.” (M.Imran :2012) A college professor provides the important historical details of the events leading up to the militant uprising in the 1990s. Foremost amongst them is how the Raja of Jammu purchased Kashmir (in 1846) for a paltry sum of Rs.7,500,000 from the British East India Company, and his descendent later acceded it to India, at the time of the 1947 partition. The commitments by the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, Prime Minister Nehru and subsequent UN resolutions to hold a plebiscite, to determine the fate of the

J&K state by the will of its people, and the renegeing on holding this referendum are covered in some detail.

The novel is a wonderful blend of historical, political issues. It vividly brings out the situation as obtained in Kashmir during past two decades and it has a grand narrative of pity, poignancy and pathos exposing apathy of the authorities towards the violation of the rights of the people. It is a document on human rights violations of women.

The story lines of the frustrated students, Ishaq, Naved, Hanif and Yasir *et al* and their crossing the LoC into Pakistan to train in military camps provide an insight into the uprising. Following their return to Srinagar and Jammu cities, their attacks on the Indian military establishments are narrated vividly. The harsh reprisals by the Indian forces, particularly their molestations of young women, are described at some length. However, Shafi has attempted to provide a balanced approach in recounting the historic events. It was shown that not all the youth were mujahids, and some had taken up the Kalashnikovs merely out of showmanship. Such misdirected youth turned their guns not only on other innocent Muslims, but also on minority groups whom they considered to be Mukhbirs. The mass exodus of the Pandits from the Kashmir valley is covered through the eyes of a Muslim engineer, who visits his former Pundit neighbor in Jammu.

Salma's tale is the tale of those women who live in between hopelessness and hope. Salma is a luckless woman. Her husband is bundled into a car never to return but she has to suffer in many forms as Butalia says, "Being without an earning member in the family meant they were forced to go out and seek work, but the moment they stepped out of the home, or stayed away from it, family members would accuse them of being women of bad character- a stigma that is difficult to live down, the more so when it is added to the stigma of widowhood." The novel touches every element of the Kashmiri society.

There are various situations in the novel which give the reflection of real events like Kunanposhpora. Salma's trauma is the trauma of Kashmir. Handling the theme of the novel with all deftness of an artist the novelists has succeeded in telling the whole Kashmir story with subtlety. Though these women are too assertive, in tracing their husbands they are stigmatised as the wives of militants and treated with suspicion by all. Like others, who have earned the title of half widow Salma has not given hope about the return of her husband.

This novel is in fact, truth written as fiction. It is a disturbingly gripping tale about the sufferings of young woman who "dares insurmountable difficulties in waiting and searching for her disappeared husband is a sad commentary on collective failure of Kashmir society that has

failed to provide succour to thousands of half widows.”(ZGM: 2012) In the novel one can hear the wails of women from the valley. Shafi introduces, to the outer world , the dark room in which the Kashmiri women have been victimized for life. It faithfully and painfully describes the pain of women losing their husbands in course of the ongoing rebellion. The details of the book are the matter of the fact and the narrative is about agonized women who are worst casualties of conflict.

Works Cited

Ahamed, Shafi. *The Half Widow*. <http://www.kashmirdispatch.org.com>. Aug 2017

Butalia, Urvashi, *Speaking Peace: Women's Voice From Kashmir*, Kali For Women, 2002

Muhammad, Z G. “The Half Widow is every Kashmiri's story”, Rev. of *The Half Widow*, by Shafi Ahmad, *Greater*, 2017.

Muzaffar , Imran, , ‘The Half Widow Released’, Rev. of *The Rashid*, Amaan. Rev. of *The Half Widow* by Shafi. 2017.

Rathore, Vaishali, “Caught in Limbo, the Half Widows of J & K”. Aug 2017.

Trambo, Irfan., Review ,*The Half Widow* by Shafi Ahmad. 2015.

Umar,Baba.‘The Delima of Kashmiri Half- widows’ Zia , Athar “Kashmiri Women: Concerns, Milestones & Solutions”2017.
