



Salma as Mouthpiece of Miseries of Unfortunate Wives in Shafi Ahmad's Novel *The Half Widow*: A Study

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ABSTRACT

When we talk of the human cost of the war in the valley, Kashmir conflict has torn apart the lives of the subjects of the valley in the inhuman form of beatings, disappearances and other untold atrocities and miseries, and most gruesome are 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 have to face the hardships they would have never imagined in the wildest of their dreams. 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) through the main character Salma 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 will attempt to deliberate on how Salma is representing the most hit section of the valley devoured and victimised by the conflict pushed to the quagmire of miseries.

Key words Conflict, Killings, Disappearances, Half-widows, Struggle, Salma, Plight of women

Introduction

Half-widow is no embellishment but a painful 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. The plight of these unfortunate women is worth consideration.

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 the Kashmir marked by the epochal event that dominates all the discourses on the theme, the 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.

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 reflection of Kashmir valley and touches a significant issue of contemporary times.

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. 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 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.

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. Ahmad portrays struggle of a widow, Salma, of frontier Kupwara district whose husband, Aslam, gets disappeared once upon a time in Kashmir and never returned. On a fateful evening, her husband is taken away by some unknown gun-toddlers never to be seen again.

Aslam left his office and waited on the bus stop for a bus to take him home... Suddenly, a car without number plates came to a screeching halt near him and three gun men jumped out of the car and bundled Aslam into it. Before he could narrate his story and reveal his identity, he was blindfolded and the car sped off instantly. (P-141)

As Salma come to know, she eventually goes from pillar to post in search of him but finds no light at the end of the tunnel. The mother of three then starts an arduous search for her husband. She feared he existed 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. She visits jails, interrogation centres, army camps, the offices of politicians and even goes to Rajistan but all in vain.

She had even met the senior officers of the police and searched the interrogation centres and lock-ups of the military establishments for her husband. Though the intense search yielded nothing but she left no stone unturned in the process. She kept exhausting her meagre financial recourses. Even some people tried to take undue advantage of her miseries. (p-180)

In this painful search, she is exploited by one and all—the local pseudo priest *Bub*, greedy Rahim whom she calls Kaka “who had taken the money but nothing concrete came from him” (P-158) and the unknown policeman who took her a huge amount tries to harass her sexually.

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. 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 neighbour 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) When the mean and corrupt policeman tells her that Aslam is in jail in Rajasthan, which later turns out to be a mean game of the so called guardian of the public just for his

lust and money, she sells her house to arrange a travel to Rajasthan and hush money for officer there. Eventually she left with nothing and begins to work as servant in city household, doing all the menial work (to survive herself for the day she could tell her children, there Abu is back). But she could not do much more and her children turned fit only for the *yateem khanas* (orphanages) and the family falls apart as Salma is “a widow as well as married at the same time”(p-145) the state which made her life a smouldering hell.

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. With her husband disappeared, she is left without any income.

The abrupt disappearance of the family head was the biggest loss and his absence from the scene deprived them of the monthly income which was very important for their survival. The support base started dwindling. The money, saved in the bank, became difficult to be withdrawn because there was no proof of Aslam having been killed as his dead body was not traceable.(p-145)

The things became more difficult when the government office, where Aslam worked, too refuses to pay Salma the missing Aslam's wages. Salma suffers in multiple ways—financially, socially and psychologically. Besides, Shafi renders empathetically the endearing love of a woman for her husband. Undoubtedly, Salma's efforts and the sacrifices she makes in attempting to locate her husband, would bring tears to many readers' eyes. Furthermore Shafi has succeeded in depicting the impact of the forced disappearances on the children in a conflict zone. They don't even get access to education but are rather pushed to the ditch of child labour. The elder son Raja gives up schooling because he has no fees to pay. The life of such children life is completely ruined and their tender childhood torn. When Salma's son Azhar demands a rupee, the answer she gives rends a heart.

“Give me one rupee for ice cream.” Azhar said.

“No money please. You know we need so much of money to get your father back.”(p-187)

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. When Salma fails to trace her husband and her miseries increase day by day she thinks of committing suicide but her motherly feeling finally replace this idea.

Though nothing concrete materialized from her search but she did not lose hope. She did lose courage at occasions and decided to end her life to ward off all miseries but then the very thought of her children stopped her from taking any extreme step.(p-191)

The background and the events surrounding Salma's life and the forced disappearance of her husband and the root cause of other human rights violations in the valley has been given a good space. Shafi has not failed to provide 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 seventy five thousand from the British East India Company, and his descendent later acceded it to India, at the time of partition in 1947. 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 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. The novel is a wonderful blend of historical, political and social elements, which 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 especially women. It is heart wrenching document on human rights violations of women in Kashmir.

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.

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 thousands others, who have earned the title of half widow Salma never gives up hope about the return of her husband but hopes against hope.

Conclusion: The novel is truth written as fiction and 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.

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