

# CONFLICT AND WOMEN IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: A STUDY OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES FROM SHAHNAZ BASHIR'S SCATTERED SOULS

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## ABSTRACT

*Jammu and Kashmir have been a disputed territory between India and Pakistan since the sub-continent partition in 1947. The history of any conflict zone is filled with ambiguous, gloomy and unresolved stories that are the outcome of violence. Such conflict zone violence has severe results on the common masses, who are the silent victims of such conflict. The period of '1990s was the most horrendous in Kashmir when insurgency was at its peak. The sufferings and brutalities evoked literary writings where the indigenous writers tell the painful past from the suppressed people's perspectives, which are otherwise not recorded in the nationalist narratives. Women are the silent sufferers of any conflict, and women in Kashmir are the most victimized. Over the last three decades, the Kashmiri women have undergone severe trauma; their sons have been killed, their children orphaned, husbands disappeared. This paper attempts to analyze selected short stories from Shahnaz Bashir's Scattered souls where he retells and recounts pathos and loss of women caught up in the conflict of Kashmir. These narratives are recorded as history seen and experienced by Kashmir's who have been silenced and marginalized.*

**KEYWORDS:** Conflict, History, Subaltern pasts, Trauma, Women.

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## INTRODUCTION

Decades of terror and turmoil in Jammu and Kashmir with the consequent unrests have unarguably pictured Kashmir as one of the most conflicted zones. This age-old unresolved conflict of Jammu and Kashmir has resulted in, beatings, killings, disappearances, bloodshed and other untold miseries and atrocities on the people, including the misfortune women suffered. Trauma, stress, depressions, miscarriages and abortions are common among women. The conflict in the Valley has created tremendous uncertainty and fear among the women in Kashmir. Every individual in the Valley of paradise has faced curfews, blackouts, cross-firing on the roads and other forms of violence by the security forces. Kashmiri writers have started writing about themselves, telling their tales to the world through fiction and non-fiction. These writings have helped to give voice to local narrative into the discourse, reflecting their understanding of the problem. Many literary narratives have portrayed the plight of these women and their struggle to cope with life. However, Shahnaz Bashir in his short story collection, Scattered Souls has depicted how these women survive through the conflict and how the

social taboos and trauma consume them in the most realistic and unique way. This interwoven collection of stories focuses on life, trauma and death in the conflict-ridden Valley. Set in the 1990s, the book is a narrative of when the Indian Army quashes a mass rebellion, affecting the residents' lives in the Valley. A mother raged with feelings of angst towards her child born of rape. An ideal couple's peaceful existence is shattered by a violent attack and other stories of pathetic lives.

## DISCUSSION

The thirteen stories in this collection are well-knit and interwoven. Bashir is a versatile storyteller; He gives voice to the people who have experienced and lived the conflict. Shahnaz Bashir's stories bring attention to the human cost of the conflict and depict the consequences of the militarization and long-drawn conflict of Kashmir on its people in general and women in particular. When we look at the story 'Psychosis' where Sakeena, The protagonist, wife of ex-militant Ghulam Mohiudeen, finds herself in difficult situations during her husband's detention, it depicts the tragedy that befell her. She has to undergo all kinds of humiliation and harassment

at the hands of 'security' forces, resulting in a heartless and brutal gang rape. Sakeena, in her shanty in Srinagar, is raped one night by five security men, four of them soldiers of the armed forces. Sakeena's husband, Ghulam Mohiuddin, an "ex-militant" who had "decided to strike out on his own and earn his livelihood by driving an auto-rickshaw", never returned. Sakeena was expecting him back when the men barged into her house. This traumatic memory' later takes a 'human shape' in the form of Bilal, her son. Sakeena suffers from the post-traumatic Disorder due to rape and lands at the Psychiatric Diseases Hospital, "The only such hospital in the valley", an institution "she has been visiting for the last six years." In the process, she almost loses her mental poise and is taken to be treated by a psychiatrist. The trauma pushed Sakina into a mess right from the beginning, six years ago suffering from cycloid psychosis, and being admitted to this hospital for acute onset of, delusions, confusion, hallucinations, altered behaviour, pain and anxiety. With her bleeding, razor nicked wrists- she had to be literally tied to her bed (SS.p-55).

While Sakeena is in the hospital, another woman victim of the conflict is a mother who loses her son in front of her eyes after being shot dead. Here the writer reminds us that there is no place in Kashmir where we will not find a woman not affected by the conflict resulting in her psychological and mental breakdown. She has to struggle to queue up behind morose old women- whose son, Sakina learnt; his son has been killed in front of her eyes...( SS.p-53)

The story of Sakeena and Bilal also highlights the constant social stigma of our society. Instead of sympathizing with the victims, they are blamed and targeted for all the sins they never committed. Shahnaz Bashir through these fictionalized stories reminds us of one of the tragic rape cases of Kunan poshpora in Shopian in which the armed forces gang-raped the Kashmiri women. Sakeena's dreams about her husband Ghulam Mohiudeen, asking her to take care of their daughter, Insha and herself.

Sakeena accepts the fact that she has been widowed. She shares her heart with the psychiatrist. However, her past haunts her; the six-year-long treatment proved futile to cure Sakeena. The other trauma is the site of her son Bilal, who is the memoir of that dreadful night, of which he was conceived. Although Bilal is the human shape of a painful memory, she cannot

seem to part with him because he is part of her. The stories of Sakeena and Bilal tell the history of numerous compromises the people in the conflict have to make. These compromises are unheard of and accepted as a part of one's life. Bashir has depicted the gruesome pain of the women in Kashmir. The conflict has turned their lives miserable, distressing, and stripped them of their dignity. There is always a predominant fear they live with and helplessness to face the security forces' shame. When Sakeena goes to an army camp to get some information about her missing husband, she is rebuked and assaulted to the core by the security forces' statements at Sonawri camp after bribing the guards of five thousand rupees for providing the information of her husband. She felt insulted when "the guards demanded that she sleep with them. Sakeena left crying" (SS.p-63). Through Sakeena's story, Bashir talks about the lost generations. Moreover, the conditions that precipitated from it like that of half widows of Kashmir. They have a haunting past, traumatic present and no future at all. Their life is a pile of suffering, hopelessness and humiliations. They live a rotten life in intense distress. They are distorted personalities. These half widows while searching for their missing husbands have to bear all inhuman treatment. This unrealistic hope too seems to make their lives even more dejected. They run from pillar to post and return without any trace. There was no army camp, no interrogation centre. No jail that Sakeena didn't knock the doors of while searching for Ghulam Mohiuddin.( SS.p- 62). The whole family suffers when a lone bread earner is lost.

The children are pushed by circumstances to take up the responsibility they are not even prepared for. The family struggle of the ex-militant is extended, in the story "Theft". Bashir depicts how the death of a lone bread earner pushes the incapable and yet not ready family members to do the menial jobs for survival. The women of Kashmir have been going through these traumatic conditions for the last more than three decades of conflict. The conflict has a significant impact on ordinary people, and the society in Kashmir is scattered, leaving the families shattered. Insha struggles to lend meaning to her life and assert her existence in the face of social repression and distrust after the disappearance of her father Ghulam Mohiuddeen and rape of her mother by security persons. Insha faces a lot of disrespect and humiliation and is accused of theft at a cosmetic shop while working as a salesgirl. The

conflict shattered this family into pieces and made them struggle amid trauma. The story 'The House' draws a real picture of how conflict has the power to disintegrate the most happiest of households. A story that portrays the life and death of women Zareena, also speaks for those who indirectly or directly are the soft targets of the conflict. Either woman in Kashmir loses her daughter or son, husband, father, or is killed herself. In all the cases, the women are the victims. Zareena was down to earth woman far better than her husband: Zareena kept the house lively. Unlike Farooq, who wanted the house to be grand yet inhospitable Zareena would try to draw people in (SS.p-134). The conflict also has the power to mellow down and soften the most arrogant and overweening individuals. This is depicted through Farooq Ahmad Mir's household's break down following his wife's death in cross-firing. Zareena is killed innocent.

The bullets have not pierced the body of Zareena only, but her whole household is damaged in the other form. She was killed ruthlessly. Zareena was an affectionate and a typical Kashmiri hospitable woman. But on a fateful day in May 1999, She was killed by troops in her compound..but before they could reach the gate, the Army was already inside the compound, furious and desperate. The troops fired indiscriminately, and Zareena was hit(SS.p135). The killing of a woman means killing a whole family. The bereaved and affected members become a group of shattered personalities living in an emotional vacuum. The loss of his wife miserably wounds the conceited Farooq. He is shorn of all the interest in life. The death of Zareena led to the disintegration of the family: Without Zareena, Farooq's family began to disintegrate, and he grew more and more lonely, frustrated and deeply forlorn. He missed Zareena and would often stay indoors and cry secretly in her memory(SS.p-135). Shahnaz Bashir brings out the physical and emotional torture a family has to undergo in the conflict honestly, with graphic details. Women primarily have been the most terribly injured party, in this decade's long conflict. Anywhere in the world, women suffer the most in any sort of conflict. Either she is war booty in the hands of belligerents, or she is a widow back at home or she suffers as a daughter. The adult female who became her consort is the further devastating tale of passing and wailing. It is about Ayesha and her affectionate husband Tariq Zargar, a banker by profession who is short dead in Lal Chowk

Srinagar by armed forces. The passing away of Tariq terminates the ideal marital alliance. The soul of Ayesha has torn apart into pieces, and she becomes a pageant of frustration and mental damage. Due to Tariq's passing away, Ayesha is unable to prevail over this blow and starts to impersonate Tariq's day-to-day regime, as Ayesha slips towards insanity. The author has sketched the picture of agony of a dead man's wife. Women lose their husbands without being a party to the political tussle. The blameless Kashmir's are killed in a cold blood murder, especially who are the sole earners for their respective families, leaving those families in unending agony of hardships both financially and mentally. The narrator explains the ideal connection of the pair as: I had never known as perfect and loving Husband-wife pair as them. With the passage of time, I was persuaded in that entire neighbourhood; they were the personification of love ( SS.P-170). The author wants to put forward that husband to a woman is the most important person and helps to incline each other in ups and downs of life principally when the association between the two is the epitome of love and interchangeable understanding. When Ayesha returns from Anantnag to Khan Sojourn Srinagar where she and Tariq lived before and during his passing away as relatives of Ayesha think that taking Ayesha to the same place may bring some peace to her. However, She lost all her interests in life after her husband was brutally killed in cold-blooded murder by armed forces and behaved differently towards all. As the news spread about Ayesha's return, the neighbours in Jawahar Nagar began to thong Khan Sojourns. But Ayesha was completely different towards all (SS.P 181). The loss of her husband had an adverse effect on the mindset of Ayesha and gradually slipped into madness and trauma. Her madness and agony lead her to imitate the style and daily doings of her lost husband. She is more like a dead body. The trauma and agony after losing Tariq are quite evident from her strange conduct. Ayesha stood on the balcony leaning on the railing over the grille the way Tariq used to. Smoking the cigarette, the same way Tariq and she addressed in man's tone as if she were man and not a woman. She paced the veranda limping like her other half. The other women quietly watched Ayesha crying behind her back (SS.P 181). Ayesha was brought back from Anantnag to Sojourn Khan to recover from the shock and agony. However, the result was not fruitful because of her indifferent approach; the condition

and mental trauma remained the same. Ayesha permanently remained in mental shock and could not overcome from the brutal killing of Tariq. Ayesha became the source of sorrow for everyone. The other women in the flat tried their best to keep Ayesha indoors as she turned into a pageant for the locality. One other day Ayesha is found dressed in Tariq's Navy blue shirt, wearing his pair of shoe and carrying his leather briefcase, walking down the lane for office as Tariq was a bank employee (SS.P 181-182). In all the stories, Shahnaz Bashir has made artful use of tragedies that Kashmiris faced in the last three decades, which now form a part of the Kashmiri collective conscience. In doing so, the author places a strange hope in the face of extreme pain, sorrow and difficulty. In one way it was like giving voice to the uncounted unvoiced whose stories were buried somewhere along the way as only reports of violence and politics come out into the world from Kashmir.

### CONCLUSION

The selected stories poignantly reflect on all the atrocities women have gone through in the conflict of Kashmir, which are not heard or recorded in mainstream narratives. Shahnaz Bashir through these stories very well illustrates the plight of the marginalized women in particular. He gives vivid picture of the conflict that has exacted -a mother whose son was killed in front of her, of fear psychosis, of post-traumatic disorders, of devastated families, of half widows. Women in these stories spend their entire lives in search of their husbands and die with the hope of their return. Bashir delineates the horrific images of trauma and death in all his characters. Ayesha and Sakeena according to the writer are true

representatives of suffered womanhood in Kashmir subjected to either rape or physical abuse or trauma. Women like Sakeena live with these vulnerabilities of insecurity and uncertainty. These stories also enhance the perception of the violence and conflict of Kashmir.

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