

# Sense Of Incompleteness In Shahnaz Bashir's The Half Mother

**Rizwan Zama Kichloo Balwan**

*Research Scholar Sir M V P G Centre, Mandya University of Mysore Mail: [rizwan.english89@gmail.com](mailto:rizwan.english89@gmail.com)*

## **Abstract:**

The worst sufferer in any conflict zone is the common man, and to add to the existing angst, the victims of the worst species are women. War-oriented zones directly impact the existential sense of completeness of the affected. Bashir's narrative encapsulates this human essence of incompleteness in the way he depicts the women characters in *The Half Mother* (2014). This paper delves into the lives of those women whose agony is felt by none but themselves. That is, the study attempts to look into the women's consciousness whose experiences of loss and cries remain unheard by the world as they witnessed their lives and surroundings crumbling amidst the bloody conflict in Kashmir. One of the most afflicted communities is the mothers. A mother losing her child is a woman's prime and most tormenting forfeiture. It does not only affect the mother but traumatises her in every possible conceivable manner. Bashir's *The Half Mother* (2014) revolves around the incompleteness which gnaws at motherhood through his well-illustrated Haleema, the torchbearer and representative of angst and distress. Subsequently, the paper probes into motherhood to analyse the existential incompleteness of women in the Kashmir-bond conflict zone.

**Keywords:** Existence, motherhood, angst, incompleteness, conflict zone.

## **Introduction:**

Hails from the journalism background, Shahnaz Bashir has been a direct witness to the multiple sufferings, and pangs bore by women in Kashmir. Women are the silent victims and soft targets in conflict zones whose trauma, sorrow, and wretchedness go unseen or unspoken. In this technological era, every individual invariably has access to some form of media through which the mass is kept updated about the happenings and events in the immediate surroundings, locally and internationally. Kashmir too is heavily dependent on the media; whatever the media shows or prints is what everyone believes and knows. Nevertheless, given his personal experiences and encounter with female anguish, Bashir did not remain insensitive to harsh female reality which

he fictionalises within the narrative of *The Half Mother* (2014). Bashir's professional experience and creative talent make him write about the tragic happenings of the 90s in Kashmir, due to which this his novel ceases to be a work of fiction based on reality. Bashir, as a male onlooker to the traumatic existence of the Kashmiri women allows him to represent womanhood in its incompleteness in the novel. Therefore, the observed female-oriented trauma, misery and suffering form the central theme of the novel.

The narrative frame is set in Natipora and told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator. There are various aspects and themes covered in the novel, but the highlight and central theme of *The Half Mother* is to give voice to the mother who has lost everything she had in her son. Haleema's

lives through her high sense of 'half' and incomplete selfhood from the beginning to the end of her human existence are subtly inscribed within the narrative development. Critically read, Bashir has masterfully caricatured Haleema as a fictitious representation of the woman who enacts upon the Imam's statement when he preaches that "the greatest sufferings bring the greatest hopes; the greatest miseries greatest patience and the greatest uncertainties lead to the greatest quests" (p. 1)

Bashir makes one commendable attempt to bring out the story of the other side through the feelings, perspectives and thoughts of the protagonist Haleema. He probes into the consciousness and realities of the unreported experiences lived by the women caught in the web of conflict. Women are often relegated to motherhood and social and patriarchal constructs that limit their voice and space. Mothers are deemed to be self-sacrificing with indomitable strengths and passive. The author fuses his journalistic and writing skills to reveal the bitter conditions of mothers in conflict-based Kashmir. Through one mother, a voice is given to millions of suffering mothers who cannot speak and fight for themselves. The mothers' silent suffering not only accentuates the anarchy in which they live, but most importantly, it is appropriated to break the silences. Mirza Waheed has summed up the novel crisply in this fashion, "With delicately drawn characters, Shahnaz Bashir tells the heartbreaking story of a woman's battle for life, dignity and justice". (The Collaborator)

Through the character of Haleema, the author has collectively drawn attention to Haleema's suffering in the past and the present. Her angst does not seem to know an end as she continues to exist within anguishes. Motherhood, for the author, becomes the space enacting a high sense of incompleteness when he depicts Haleema as not simply a mother searching for her son in the narrative; She is the representative of

all the mothers who suffer just like her in silence and submissiveness. They are the silent sufferers whose anguish remains unheard, and through Haleema, the novel attempts to raise and unfold various issues to the reader. Javeed Ahmad Raina's observations are apt when he asserts:

She (Haleema) I'd not only the mouthpiece of infinite miseries and misfortunes that people of the state had to experience, but also a keen observer of the secret state executions- torture, retention and custodian killings. The story as such is a re-telling of the disappearances, tortures in custodian camps as well as state policies towards it's people in the political mayhem of nineties... The Half Mother showcases the actual plight and suffering of Haleema who lost all her dear ones, to the war which benefits none, while being the mute spectator and witness to the events. She, therefore, suffers from both physical tortures as well as mental or psychological agonies which trace and track her always until finally trap her before dying a painful death. (P No. 2 )

Through the torturous search for the son, Haleema exhibits the psychological, emotional, physical and personal agonies of women trapped in the war conditions. Her painful cries and struggle to find her son connotes a high sense of female half-ness within which she exists. At this point, Haleema illustrates the patriarchal parameters which define womanhood. That is, a woman's sense of motherly completeness is affirmed through the existence of her children. The son's absence accentuates Haleema's incomplete being as well as her pain.

The life of Haleema is all about halves and incomplete incidences. She is less fortunate to possess anything, material or immaterial, to complete in her life. As a child, she lost her mother. Since then, she received the love and care of her father but none of her. Brought up in a single parent house, her childhood went by in the heavy absence of motherhood. She lived through this emotional incompleteness of her family's parenting to survive. At an age when she should enjoy unconditional love and care every child needs, she was already learning to manage the household chores. The author describes this life event: "Haleema was eight when tuberculosis killed Boba... Haleema devoted herself fully to household chores then... Slowly, the chores became a habit; the habit seeped into her and then became a part of her being... ( p.no. 10)

Nevertheless, unable to enjoy her mother's love to its fullest, she had to choose between her home and her studies after her demise. At a very young age, she had to take up her home responsibilities. She had to drop out of her studies and take care of the household. Haleema's choice of her home forces her to abandon her studies with a heavy heart despite being a bright student. The educational journey remains unfulfilled as she dropped out of school at an early age.

The sense of incompleteness follows this fated mother as the same happened when she married. Haleema's husband impregnated her and left her just after three months into their marriage because of his extramarital affair. The marriage, unfortunately, gave her no respite as it left her empty being with no sense of marital fulfilment, happiness and completeness. The marital abandonment exemplifies the extent of angst she suffers from her incompleteness. She could not make the most of her wifehood with her husband as he abandoned her, rejecting his responsibilities as a father and husband. Her material abandonment evokes another half experience of her life.

Haleema married a medical assistant from a Srinagar nursing home who began having an affair with a nurse at the hospital within two months of the wedding. Haleema became reticent, and let him go. The marriage ended in a whimper when Haleema divorced her husband in just three months. (p. 13)

After suspicion arises and every member of Natipora is questioned regarding their involvement in terrorist activities, Haleema's father, Ab Jaan, does not entertain the way in which the citizens are treated and protests which cost his life. Haleema is in utter shock, and before she can recover from the prime loss of her life, her son has been ripped away from her. The author reiterates the strong sense of incompleteness as he does not provide sufficient time and space for the daughter to mourn the loss of her father. The fact that the mourning time was limited, Haleema once again lives in a state of incompleteness. It dramatises her loss of the Ab Jaan as well as Haleema's flawed completeness. Unable to grasp and accept the reality of her life's loss, she seeped into the prevailing sense of incompleteness with the death of Ab Jaan. Subsequently, Tabassum Saleem's research scholar comments are apt here when she rightly states that:

The death of Ab Jaan comes as a jolt to Haleema, leaving her broken and shattered. She does not accept the harsh reality that her father is no more... his death means a colossal loss for Haleema because his death for her means the loss of a responsible guardian, a lone bread- earner and a sympathetic father. ( p No. 162)

Critically understood, she remains a half-daughter without complete parental presence. She feels abandoned by her single parent in a vacuum whereby the fulfilment of completeness seems to be an illusion.

The half-mother's life, journey and purpose in life are intricately linked to her son. The latter is the defining agency of her motherly and female existence as a whole. Under mistaken consideration of her son Imran being someone else with the same name, he is picked up in front of her eyes by Major Aman Lal Kushwaha:

After three months after her father's murder, fate again plays its dirty role. One fateful night Imran gets arrested by Major Kushwaha during a raid at night and is pushed into oblivion never to return back. He is picked up by army on the pretext that he shares the name with other known militant from his locality Imran Bhat( p. 55)

Mistaken names or lifting away people intentionally in the name of confused identities is a common practice during wartime. However, the impact of such an act on the family, especially the mother's psyche, remains irreversible. Thereafter begins the series of her life's events that only made everything half and never complete. Her incompleteness heavily rests in the absence of her son, the masculine factor which gives her a sense of being. Subsequently, Haleema's exists in incompleteness revolves about the sense of incomplete motherhood that she nurtures after the incidence with the son.

There is a sense of incompleteness in her being a mother too. She is a 'half mother' as that is how she defines herself in the court. She loses her son when he is quite young, and she is unable to come out of the trauma of losing her only child.

She does not know whether her son is dead or alive; nonetheless, she is on a quest to find him and is determined to know his status, whatever it may be. Haleema is guided by her motherhood and is resolute to search for her son. She is not ready to accept his absence as she has lived through the absence of many of her own people. This drives her to live despite her not being in the best of health. There again, the prevalence of half-ness is strengthened through her actions. She does everything she can to find and reach him, but all her attempts only turn out futile. She could not get rid of the half-ness here as she could not come to terms with the loss. This also affects her physically as she feels remorse and pain; she feels guilty as she cannot protect her son, whom she called upon for his loss so early. Once more, the reader is reminded of Tabassum Saleem. She observes that:

When parents lose their child, a part of them dies. Thus by losing Imran she loses her life. The condition of her health goes from bad to worse. Beside her physical health, her mental deteriorates day by day. She is now having auditory hallucinations and believing that things talk to her. ( p. No. 169)

Haleema's mental strength and resilience to find her son his only an act that a mother can do whhch is commendable and worth applauding.

Haleema had never travelled out of Natipora, but for her son, she explores distant areas to almost become a begger. She does all this despite depleting health and living conditions. She has been suffering from bronchitis for a long time, yet she remains oblivious to her precautious condition. She does not give up even if her body does not sport her. Readers admire Haleema's female courage as she empowers herself within her perilous life's incomplete journey. The latter

resonates with her ingrained motherly halfness. Had her body been fit and sound, she might not have had to undergo the physical fatigue she did.

She does not leave any stone unturned to search for her missing son. She does not feel traumatised though her faith in Law and justice is shattered. Her indefatigable spirit and rebellious nature of tracking her son make her a strong woman... into a worrier.. from being simppllle homely woman to a woman with an iron-rich in search of any piece of information about her missing son. (p.169)

Haleema's quest to find her son takes her entire life. She gets clue after clue and keeps getting updated now and then about her son. Her final hope is Major Kushwaha, who is a Major in the Indian army because he took Imran away. But that last lead remains unreachable, leaving her search 'half' completed because he was killed in a battle, as Colonel Ajith Kumar informed her when the author writes, "Colonel in order to assure her feelings inform he that Major Aman Lal Kushwaha was her only hope after hearing the news of his death she loses her lost hope" (p.58). Haleema remains 'half' till the end, but only later does she call herself 'half'. Her being 'half' is more than just being incomplete as it goes beyond her physical existence.

### **Conclusion:**

In sum, *The Half Mother* is one powerful tale which impacts the reader to the core. The character of Haleema raises to be a universal figure. Through Haleema, Bashir has portrayed the agony of many mothers of Kashmir with dexterity. He may be a male, but his artistic abilities have made him understand and write with the emotion of a woman. Bashir reveals Haleema's half-ness sympathetically, yet the readers only remember her as a strong, resilient, decisive and powerful personality. Reminding one of Synge's *Manrya* of the great play *The Riders to the Sea*.

### **References:**

1. Bashir, Shehnaz. *The Half Mother*. Hachette, 2014.
2. *The Half mother: A memoir of misery, misfortune and trauma*. Javeed Ahmad Raina
3. *The Half Mother: A woman's journey for justice*. Tabassum Saleem
4. [Http://m.greaterkashmir.com/news/gk-magazine/2015](http://m.greaterkashmir.com/news/gk-magazine/2015) Mohd. Nageen Rather
5. [Http://m.hindustantimes.com/books/2014](http://m.hindustantimes.com/books/2014)
6. *Jammu and Kashmir conflict: a mother abscess: victimised mothers in the novels The Half mother by Shahnaz and Red Maize by Danesh Rana: a comparative analysis*. Mirza Waheed