



## Plight of Women in Shafi Ahmad's *The Half Widow*

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Shafi Ahmad was born and brought up in Kashmir. He is an engineer turned writer who started his career writing for the newspaper *Aftab*. He also worked for Television and Radio. He wrote one 13-episode serial and half a dozen plays for Radio and TV but it was a fleeting affair. He has authored two novels *The Half-widow* (2012) and *Shadows Behind the Ghost Town* (2014) both set in Kashmir in 1990. This novel was born in the Kokernag area when Shafi and his colleagues were attacked by renegades, they escaped by the skin of their teeth and this escape from death proved a miracle so he started writing the novel *The Half-widow*. Enforced disappearances in Kashmir have given rise to a fractured identity of 'half-widows' and 'half-orphans' in huge numbers. "Dedicated to the relentless struggle of those who continue to search for their beloved ones in the conflict zone", *The Half Widow* is a work of historical fiction on Kashmir (Ahmad 5). T.N. Dhar divides historical fiction into 'documented' and 'disguised' novels. The 'documented historical novel' he says is one "which incorporates actual events and people in it" while the disguised one "provides sufficient evidence of novelist's interest in the past" and "deals with history through a camouflage which can take diverse forms" either 'too transparent or too obscure" (Dhar 17). Shafi Ahmad's novel stands between these two types. He gives frequent references both directly as a part of his narrative, and indirectly through the Professor's notes that refer to the political history of Kashmir. Like any historian, Shafi Ahmad gives reference to historical works. Among other books, the reference list includes Kashmir: *The Wounded Valley* by Ajit Bhattacharjee, and *Mumlatat Ke Aakhri Din* by P.G. Rasool. The novel takes diverse forms of camouflage. The story of a half-widow is contextualized within the turbulent times of the 1990s.

Women are directly affected by the conflict in Indian-administered Kashmir walking on a razor's edge. On the one hand, they have to struggle for their sustenance and on the other, they have to fight for justice. Amidst unfavorable circumstances, an indifferent society, ineffective laws, cumbersome judicial procedures, lack of rehabilitation mechanisms, and unresponsive government machinery, these women continue to bear the brunt of the conflict prevailing here for more than twenty years. Many of these women are the widows and 'half-widows', that is, those whose husbands have died, and those who are ignorant of the fate of their husbands--their menfolk are just made to disappear, often for years, and they do not know if they are still alive. More often than not these men were the breadwinners in the family and with their death or disappearance, their entire family was plunged into penury with the subsequent psychological, economic, and social repercussions.

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This paper seeks to focus on the lives of these brutalized women, both the widows and half-widows, by placing before the readers their real-life stories as narrated by them to the Shafi Ahmad. As these widows and half-widows continue to suffer in silence because of the lack of structured support or moral assistance rather they are marked as outcasts because of the liaisons of their husbands with the militants.

In a typical Kashmiri society, women's identity is intertwined with their husbands once a woman is married off, she becomes the man's responsibility. Thus, many of these women (half-widows) and their children get into a survival crisis with no source of income. This dual role of Kashmiri women is given space in the novel that was denied to women since time immemorial. Since the early 1990s, there have been various forms of writing about the women of Kashmir but Kashmir is at the center stage and women find almost no space there. Urvashi Butalia in her Book *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* observes that "The Kashmir conflict, for example, has generated a vast amount of analytical and historical literature; very little of it actually mentions women. Yet today, in Kashmir, there are large numbers of women who are identified as 'half widows' (women whose husbands are assumed dead but there is no proof to show they actually are), widows, mothers who have lost their sons, or those whose daughters have been raped, young women who dare not step out of the house, women who have pushed out of employment by the fear and uncertainty created by conflict, and those who are suffering" (xii-xiii) from medical and psychological conditions related to stress and trauma.

This novel is the story of a half-widow Salma who is hapless and helpless. The novel opens with Salma, cleaning utensils, and mopping the floor. She is lost in the memories of her beloved husband as she listens to some Kashmiri song the sound of which is coming from some distant place. "yaro me ha chon amaro ta dori qayamat pyare yo. Wafadar yaro me ha chon amaro ta dori qayamat pyar yo" (My first love, I am passionate about you. I will wait for you till the Doomsday). This song is symbolic and a poetic rendering of the continuous wait that she has been going through. She is reminded of her beloved husband. "Although she [has] lost her smile for years, yet past memories brought smiles to her lips, eyes shone like stars as she felt very near to her beloved" (Ahmad 10). The rest of her story is told in flashbacks. Her husband Aslam is taken away by some gunmen while he was waiting at the bus stop to return home. He is bundled into a car without a number plate to never return back. The story follows Salma's relentless struggles to locate her husband while simultaneously taking care of her children. The very thoughts of her children are crucial in holding her back, in not taking the extreme step of ending her life which she decides at times of hopelessness. After sending her children to school, she leaves herself every day with her baby daughter to search for her husband. She searches for him in different interrogation centers and lockups of military establishments but finds no trace at all. As her husband Aslam becomes a victim of forced disappearance, she never loses hope of his return. In a car, without



number plates, he is bundled by some gunmen to never return back. Salma keeps waiting and struggling to find his whereabouts. The abrupt disappearance of the family head deprives them of the family income. The department Aslam was working with stopped releasing his salary as they couldn't get his attendance certificate anymore. The search for her missing husband is a daunting task that Salma takes fearlessly to face its consequences. She goes from pillar to post in his search but gets no trace at all. She first goes to a district jail thinking her husband is lodged there. Her suffering is even more painful to those coming to meet their beloved ones lodged in jail. She with hope keeps waiting but there is no announcement of her husband's name. "That name is not written here", the Policeman replied (Ahmad 148). The tale of suffering does not end here. Salma's narrative also reveals the complexities of a patriarchal society. She is duped by a fake saint who promises her to get her husband's whereabouts. She sells the ornaments which Aslam has bought her, thinking the 'Pir' would get her husband back if she gives him money. She thinks that "nothing is precious for [her] than [Aslam] and in the process, she even loses her house" (Ahmad 156). This false consciousness withers with her exposure to the social structure. Her shift toward public space not only changes her gender role but the societal mask also gets shattered simultaneously. She becomes conscious of the social realities of the world outside. Salma is not the only half-widow with her children waiting for their disappeared dad's return. Salma also keeps struggling in hope against hopelessness. However, to tell her story, the author locates her in the context responsible for her miserable condition. As men cross the border to receive arms training women are left behind to bear the brunt of their families. It is indeed a fact that armed conflict has changed the gender roles in Kashmir. Because of the sudden shift, the consequences of the newly acquired role can be detrimental to women. This sudden shift is particularly shocking for women whose men are victims of forced disappearance. Salma's life and struggles as a half-widow would be crucial to explore the detrimental consequences of such sudden involuntary disappearances. Though Kashmiri women do not take an active role in armed struggle yet their portrayal as indirect victims alone is itself problematic for it endangers their definition and limits them as the women of martyred men. Men, on the other hand, are projected as saviours who "could tolerate everything except the maltreatment of [their] womenfolk" (Ahmad 44): Kashmiri women are often seen as the motivating factor for men to take arms to take revenge against the 'maltreatment of their women. *The Half Widow* as a counter-hegemonic discourse highlights the victimization of women in Kashmiri by security forces (it may be propaganda to tarnish the image of the brave Indian Forces or it may be used as counter-propaganda to justify the Kashmiri insurgencies.) Shafi Ahmad describes the horrifying episode of the marriage party on 18 May 1990. Despite all their traumatic experience Rashid and Mubeena survive. They have been supportive of each other. "The village has nicknames for them. They call [them] "Crossfire thus: Bride" and Crossfire Groom" (Peer 155). Shafi Ahmad fictionalizes this incident "The trooper behind him [groom] hit him with the butt of his gun and rushed towards the bride and her maid, who showed reluctance and resistance to move towards the bunker. The bride wept and rushed towards the groom down on the



ground. Both the women were waylaid by two more troopers. They caught hold of them and forcibly took them inside the bunker” (Ahmad 55).

*The Half Widow* is not just a story about Salma. It is a web of many stories put together. The voluntary disappearances of those who cross the border to receive arms and training leave behind family members like fathers, and brothers, disappearances. The family members who are left behind are mostly women who live a tormenting struggling and undefined life as widows and half-widows. It becomes difficult for widows to marry again and for half-widows, marriage is almost impossible for they are not sure if their husbands are dead or alive. Female desire being a delicate issue to be taken out in public domain, it gets even more problematic for widows and half-widows to talk about their sexual desires. In the case of half-widows, this desire remains repressed creating various psychological disorders like psychosis, stress, schizophrenia, etc. It is even more problematic for widows/half-widows who are mothers. It becomes difficult for widows to find a suitable match to marry again. Shafi Ahmad has highlighted this social issue in *The Half Widow*. As thousands of boys crossed the border for arms training, mothers of daughters started worrying about finding suitable grooms for their daughters. The matchmaker's response is hilarious when the woman asks him if he has found a suitable boy for her daughter, Sami. "*Boba kya wanai. Yeti chu az chutie chout. Gulala chi sari apor termeti*" (Ahmad 63). (The blossoming flowers have all crossed over and they left with nothing but 'bran'). Women of dead and disappeared people in Kashmir are not just the victims of militancy: they are also the sufferers of injustice for there are no initiatives taken for their remarriage. It was only in 2013 that Muslim clerics of Kashmir issued a fatwa allowing half widows to remarry after they complete a four-year waiting period.

Half-widows are left in an ambiguous situation, uncertain whether their husbands are dead or alive, whilst also being left to deal with complex social, economic, legal and psychological problems. There have been only two half widows to have remarried till then. To conclude, it can be said that the struggle and perennial wait of women of disappeared people in Kashmir finds a realistic representation in *The Half Widow*. Shafi Ahmad has tried to rehabilitate the discarded women of Kashmir and tried to capture the pain and suffering of people in Kashmir. There is a struggle for survival and hope for peace and justice.

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