

Echoes of Loss and Longing: Women's Quest in Shafi Ahmad's 'The Half Widow'

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Abstract

The present paper aims to explore the experiences of 'half-widows' in the context of the Kashmir conflict, primarily through an analysis of Shafi Ahmad's novel *The Half Widow* (2012). The study delves into the portrayal of Salma, a representative of this group, and examines the power dynamics, social trauma, and emphasized femininity that shape the struggles of half-widows. By unravelling these complex experiences, this research contributes to a better understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of the conflict on these marginalized women. It also reveals the coping mechanisms they employ in the face of uncertainty, grief, and longing. By placing these accounts within the broader socio-political context, the study offers nuanced insights into the challenges faced by women in such complex situations. Overall, it highlights their resilience and the need for a deeper understanding of their stories within the socio-political milieu.

Keywords: Half-widows; Kashmir conflict; Longing; Loss.

Introduction

The women in Kashmir bear the brunt of the severe impact of armed conflict, facing harassment from both security forces and militants. "Armed conflicts affect both men and women, but their respective experiences may differ, at times significantly... Men may also be victims of violence, even sexual violence, in an armed conflict. Women, however, form the highest proportion of the adult civilian population who are killed and targeted for abuse in war, and they also suffer physical, economic, and psychological abuse" (Qutab, 2012: 255). The impact of armed conflict on women extends beyond visible devastation, encompassing direct targeting through acts like rape and torture, as well as indirect consequences tied to men.

Loss of male family members often leaves women without breadwinners, leading to long-term, invisible suffering and societal ostracism. "Women may not be the direct targets of the violence, yet their sufferings will be severe and prolonged. This often occurs with the death, disappearance, or disability of a male member, leaving women to struggle for survival on their own or to suffer for the actions of men" (Qutab, 2012: 256).

The term "half-widow" is used to describe Kashmiri women whose husbands have gone missing amid the ongoing conflict. These women are labelled as such because they live in uncertainty, not knowing whether their husbands are alive or deceased. The conflict has led to the disappearance of thousands of husbands in Kashmir, and the majority of these half-widows choose not to remarry due to lingering uncertainty about their husbands' fates. The term "Half Widow" itself is evocative, hinting at the plight of women due to the grim circumstances of conflict. "Such disappearance not only adversely affects the life and liberty of the person who has disappeared but also leaves the entire concerned human circle of the victim in limbo, enveloped by inconsolable grief and prodigious pain" (Wani, 2013). These women are left in a state of perpetual uncertainty, suspended between hope and despair, their lives interwoven with stories of anguish, fortitude, and silent strength.

The society impacted by conflict is ill-equipped to handle the overwhelming numbers of widows who continue to experience indifference from various quarters. Many widows face reluctance from relatives to provide support, leaving them to shoulder the responsibility of raising children independently. Often lacking education, they have limited knowledge about securing paid employment or understanding their rights and entitlements. As a result, the wives of disappeared men grapple with a range of socio-economic and emotional challenges. "The first difficulties surface soon after the death of their partners, manifesting as emotional stress, denial of inheritance rights, sexual harassment, and general social undesirability. The second wave of difficulties arises gradually, involving loss of control over their children and a growing sense of inferiority. Ultimately, the widows are weighed down by the long-term and increasing demands of household care, along with the burden of menial responsibilities. Altogether, these women find their position thoroughly compromised" (Bukhari, 2002: 41).

Whispers of Sorrow and Echoes of Longing

Kashmiri women have endured various forms of violence, including

physical abuse, torture, disfigurement, and sexual assault. Notably, instances like the Kunan Poshpora mass gang rape and the Shopian rape and murder case serve as glaring examples of this brutality. Over the past two and a half decades, Kashmiri women have faced profound trauma due to the ongoing conflict. They have lost sons, become widowed as husbands disappeared without a trace, and seen their children orphaned. The term 'Half Widow' applies uniquely to Kashmiri women because of the enforced disappearance of their husbands, with no evidence of their whereabouts. Consequently, their sons are referred to as 'Half Orphans.'

The term "half-widow" emerged in the early 1990s in Kashmir, coined by local press and human rights activists. Later, academics and scholars incorporated this term into academic discussions. According to the report 'Half Widow and Half Wife' by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JK-CCS), "the estimated number of half-widows in the valley ranges from 1,500 -2,000, based on a survey conducted in Srinagar and nearby regions". (Baba,2013) However, the actual figure remains uncertain due to constraints in conducting a comprehensive survey across the entire valley and the sensitive nature of the situation in Kashmir.

Half-widows occupy a vulnerable position, facing numerous challenges and insecurities within society. While they share similarities with other widows, they have distinct differences that are not easily discernible. The constant uncertainty surrounding the fate of their loved ones defines each day as a period of anticipation for them. The absence of evidence confirming the death of the missing person prevents the performance of essential death rites, which are crucial for the grieving person's reintegration into society. Additionally, half-widows endure the ongoing, often futile, search for any information about their loved ones. They also suffer disadvantages since the unconfirmed death of their husbands precludes them from accessing government-provided social assistance. As mentioned in the 48-page report titled Half Widow – Half Wife by APDP, "Although direct violence is disproportionately inflicted on males in Kashmir, women and children whose husbands or fathers disappear are caught in a legal conundrum that does little to compensate or protect them" (Baba, 2013).

Half-widows face a complex situation regarding remarriage, influenced by conflicting perspectives within Islamic jurisprudence. Some argue for a waiting period of four years and ten days, while others propose seeking a Muslim judge's assistance in dissolving the marriage if the husband remains missing for a year. This legal ambiguity adds to the difficulty.

Societal perception further complicates the remarriage dilemma for half-widows, who find themselves neither widows nor married women. Despite legal provisions allowing remarriage after a waiting period, most half-widows refrain from taking this step due to the social stigma attached to their unique marital status. The guilt associated with remarriage becomes a significant emotional barrier. The interplay of legal provisions, societal expectations, and personal emotions adds layers of difficulty to an already challenging situation, highlighting the nuanced struggles half-widows face in navigating their marital and social identities.

The world remained largely unaware of the atrocities faced by Kashmiri women, partly because Kashmir lacked a tradition of contemporary storytelling capable of depicting the suffering endured by its people.

Shafi Ahmad's *The HalfWidow* is a significant addition to the limited selection of historical novels portraying the lives of those in Jammu and Kashmir. This narrative tells the story of a Kashmiri woman whose once content life takes a tragic turn when her husband mysteriously disappears, delving into her ensuing struggles as a half-widow. The novel examines crimes perpetrated against Kashmiri women and vividly illustrates how they were used as instruments of war or victimized by these same instruments. The narrative hints at the deep impact of such crimes on the collective consciousness of the Kashmiri people.

The story begins with a woman cleaning dishes late at night. Her young son questions why they moved from their village to the city, where their way of life is different, and the family she works for has dinner unusually late. The novel portrays the challenging circumstances faced by half-widows. Like many others, she encounters numerous challenges in her life. Souidiya Qutab writes about them in the context of 'their role as breadwinners of their households in the process, they struggle between the new roles and responsibilities, on one side, and their own vulnerabilities and deficiencies, on the other' (Qutab, 2012). Shafi Ahmad skilfully depicts the arduous journey of a widow named Salma, from the frontier Kupwara district, whose husband, Aslam, mysteriously vanishes in Kashmir's turbulent times. One evening, he is forcefully taken away by unidentified armed individuals, never to return, leaving Salma in a state of uncertainty and despair.

"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” (Ahmed, 2012:141).

Upon discovering her husband’s disappearance, Salma embarks on a quest, seeking answers and assistance from various sources, but her efforts yield no results. As a mother of three children, she begins a painstaking journey in search of her missing husband. Despite her fears that he may no longer be alive, her love for him makes the thought of his absence unbearable. ‘Caught between her children and a missing husband she is victimized all the way round’. (Rashid, 2012). Salma persists in her pursuit, navigating formidable obstacles. She explores prisons, interrogation centres, and military installations, engages with political figures, and even travels to Rajasthan in the hope of finding her missing husband, but her quest proves fruitless.

“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 resources. Even some people tried to take undue advantage of her miseries” (Ahmed, 2012: 180).

Throughout this agonizing quest, Salma becomes a victim of exploitation by various individuals, including the opportunistic pseudo priest known as Bub whom she reposed her faith but experienced a significant betrayal who had taken the money but nothing concrete came from him, “Her neighbour Rahim, whom she refers to as Kaka, is a duplicitous person who took advantage of her; he grabbed her property at a significantly lower price and subsequently extended an offer for her to stay in a few rooms within his own residence.” Salma believes that this gesture reflects his genuine concern for her and her family. Additionally, an unidentified police officer, who had taken a substantial sum of money from her, attempts to subject her to sexual harassment. Shafi Ahmad skilfully employs the tools of a historical fiction author to seamlessly interweave the narrative of a fictional half-widow, Salma, with the real-life events that unfold around her, profoundly impacting her life. Salma receives information suggesting that someone spotted her husband Aslam, in the district jail. The reasons behind Aslam’s imprisonment remain unclear, as he was a government employee and not associated with any militant activities. He lived in a respectable home, even owning a car. As a well-liked individual, he had once come to the aid of a neighbour who was being assaulted by a group of militants, as they suspected him of being a police informant.

“Utterly distraught, it was at this moment that a troubling notion entered her thoughts. In a society where individuals exploit those in dire straits, it feels like there’s no hope left. Ending my own life might be the sole way to unburden myself, she contemplated, her mind giving serious consideration to this distressing idea. But at the same time, she was overwhelmed with shame when the idea of ending her life crossed her mind. What would become of my children if I had gone down that path? She reprimanded herself for entertaining such a thought. ‘What kind of security and care would they have in my absence? ‘I have to play their mother as well as father till he returns” (Ahmed, 2012: 165). This statement reflects the complex emotional struggle of a woman who, despite facing overwhelming challenges, ultimately prioritizes the well-being of her children and exhibits a strong sense of resilience and maternal love. It highlights the strength and determination of women in difficult circumstances, often referred to as ‘Half Mothers’ when they take on dual parental roles.

Living in impoverished circumstances, half-widows suffer from insecurity, anxiety, and stress, leading to various physiological and psychological disorders. As Tawheeda Mukhdoomi writes, “Half widows are emotionally disturbed and socially unhinged. Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) they sleep and have nightmares... They also experienced stressful events which led them to emotional instability and strain”. The abrupt disappearance of spouses inflicts psychological trauma, compounded by struggles on economic, social, and legal fronts. “According to Dr Arshad Hussain, Psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences, Srinagar, the relatives of the disappeared, especially the half-widows, often suffer from Complicated Grief, Unresolved Grief, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”. The uncertainty surrounding their husband’s fate and societal stigma amplifies mental distress, fostering chronic fear, depression, and isolation. Single parenting adds to their emotional burden, leading to emotional turbulence, fear psychosis, and, at times, even suicidal thoughts. The persistent socio-economic challenges worsen feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness, further deteriorating their economic and emotional well-being.

Shafi Ahmad adeptly and skilfully illustrates ‘how a household, longing for wholeness, was sliced and scattered into pieces. “With each part living and longing for the other, a family like many others—doomed by fate, damned by their society” (Tramboo,2013). When the unscrupulous and corrupt police officer informs her that Aslam is incarcerated in Rajasthan, a revelation that later proves to be a heartless manipulation for his own personal desires and financial gain, Salma takes the drastic step of sell-

ing her home to fund a journey to Rajasthan and provide hush money to the officer there. In the end, she is left with nothing and is compelled to take up work as a household servant in the city, performing all manner of menial tasks just to sustain herself in the hope that one day she can tell her children that their father has returned. However, her efforts prove insufficient, and her children are forced to rely on orphanages, and their family disintegrates. Salma becomes both a widow and a married woman simultaneously. The state that turned her life into an agonizing nightmare. It's evident that the innocent Kashmiris find themselves trapped in the conflict between militant groups and the police. Salma, being one of the blameless individuals, faces the additional hardship of losing her husband, leaving her with no source of 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" (Ahmed, 2012: 150).

The situation becomes increasingly challenging when the government office where Aslam was employed refuses to provide Salma with the wages her missing husband is owed. Salma endures suffering on financial, social, and psychological levels. Shafi Ahmad skilfully and compassionately portrays the profound love Salma has for her husband. Salma's relentless efforts and sacrifices in her quest to locate him would undoubtedly move many readers to tears. Shafi also effectively depicts the impact of enforced disappearances on children living in a conflict zone. These children are denied access to education and are instead forced into child labour. Salma's elder son, Raja, abandons his schooling due to the inability to pay fees, resulting in the complete upheaval of their lives and the loss of their childhood. When Salma's younger son, Azhar, requests a rupee, her response is heart-wrenching.

'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' (Ahmed, 2012: 187).

The disappearance of husbands imposes severe economic challenges on half-widows, pushing them into a precarious socio-economic situation. Without death certificates for their vanished spouses, these women face obstacles in securing property rights and essential resources. Processes

such as obtaining ration cards, transferring property, or accessing bank accounts are hindered by the lack of official documentation, leaving half-widows economically vulnerable.

According to the study 'Half-Widows in Kashmir Live Lives of Beggars', "It is claimed in the study that 98% of the half-widows have a monthly income of less than Rs 4,000. The study also revealed that 65% live in houses with minimal amenities" (Mehta, 2017). Many are forced to resort to menial work, begging, or, in extreme cases, turning to prostitution for survival. The denial of their rightful share in their husbands' property exacerbates their social and economic vulnerabilities, perpetuating a cycle of economic hardship. Even widows of government employees encounter difficulties in transferring pensions and claiming jobs designated for compassionate appointments. Unfair exploitation by in-laws adds another layer of economic struggle, leaving these women in financial precarity.

Numerous research studies reveal that a significant number of women in Kashmir accept physical, sexual, and psychological mistreatment as inevitable aspects of their destiny. Surprisingly, many of these women do not actively seek assistance, despite reporting mental health issues and persistent depression. As Salma's efforts to locate her husband prove futile and her suffering intensifies, she contemplates ending her life. However, her maternal instincts ultimately override this notion. "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" (Ahmed, 2012: 191).

This is the story of a household yearning for the warmth of family life, tragically torn apart and scattered in disarray. Each family member exists separately, yearning for reunion. As the mother tirelessly performs menial tasks to sustain herself, clinging to the hope that one day she can tell her children, 'Your father is back,' her children are relegated to orphanages, scattered across the valley they once called home. Salma's story epitomizes the experiences of women caught between despair and hope. Salma, an unfortunate woman, is subjected to numerous hardships after her husband is forcibly taken away and never returns. 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, especially when it is compounded by the stigma of widowhood' (Butalia, 2002).

The novel addresses every facet of Kashmiri society. Several situations closely mirror real-life events, such as the Kunan Poshpora incident. Salma's anguish reflects the broader anguish of Kashmir itself. The novelist skilfully navigates the novel's theme, effectively conveying the broader narrative of Kashmir. Despite these women's determination to find their missing husbands, society often labels them as militant wives, subjecting them to widespread distrust. Similar to countless others who bear the title of 'half-widow,' Salma remains unwavering in her hope for her husband's return, clinging to hope against all odds.

Conclusion

This research delves into the intricate experiences of 'half-widows' in the context of the Kashmir conflict, using Shafi Ahmad's novel *The HalfWidow* as a focal point. It examines power dynamics, explores social trauma, and analyses the shaping of emphasized femininity in these women's struggles. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological impacts of the conflict. It highlights the resilience of these women amid uncertainty, grief, and longing, and emphasizes the need for a fuller comprehension of their stories within the socio-political milieu. The research underscores the challenges these marginalized women face, ranging from economic hardships to societal stigma, and explores the complex interplay of legal provisions, societal expectations, and personal emotions regarding remarriage. It also sheds light on the psychological trauma endured by half-widows, examining its impact on their mental and physical well-being.

Shafi Ahmad's *The HalfWidow* emerges as a significant contribution, vividly portraying the struggles of Salma, a fictional character whose journey reflects the broader narrative of Kashmiri women. The narrative intertwines historical events with Salma's personal struggles, offering insights into the collective consciousness of the Kashmiri people. Salma's pursuit of her missing husband encapsulates the economic, social, and psychological challenges faced by half-widows, illustrating the love and sacrifices that define their experiences. The novel serves as a representation of the societal upheaval caused by the conflict, pushing women into roles as breadwinners and exposing them to exploitation.

Though the world remains largely unaware of the plight of Kashmiri women, this research draws attention to their struggles, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the socio-political dynamics in the region. In essence, *The HalfWidow* and the associated research un-

underscore the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by half-widows, acknowledging their resilience, and advocating for meaningful interventions to improve their lives within the conflict-ridden context of Kashmir.

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