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# Silent Scars and Unbroken Spirits: A Feminist Study of Kashmiri Aesthetics

**Dr. Shaista Malik**, Assistant Professor of English, Hazara University. shaistamalik2010@yahoo.com

**Dr. Sammar Zakki**, Lecturer in English NUML Islamabad. samarzakki@numl.edu.pk

**Momina Hafeez,** Lecturer in English UGS, NUML Islamabad. mominahafeez@gmail.com

**Fatima Batool**, Graduated from Kohat University of Science and Technology. ftmabtol13@gmail.com

*Mothers wash the bloodstained apparel of grooms*
*On stream banks,*
*Bridal wear burns to ash,*
*Bridesmaid cry*
*And the Jhelum flows.*
*(Farooq Nazaki qtd. in Peer, 160*)

## ABSTRACT

The people living in Kashmir region have suffered immensely as a result of one of the longest-running territorial disputes in contemporary history. Not only have women become the unsung victims of the ongoing conflict between the Indian state and the Kashmiri people, but they have also become important figures bearing the brunt of a protracted armed conflict. This study examines how Kashmiri women's complex situation is portrayed in literary works while under incessant military occupation and Indian state. The study argues that Kashmir is portrayed in literary works as having been devastated by decades of militarization, which has had a significantly negative impact on women's lives in the region and exposed them to a range of vulnerabilities like sexual assault, forced family members' disappearances, psychological trauma, and disruptions of their socioeconomic status. It also aims to critically analyze how the gendered effects of state violence are portrayed, emphasizing how Kashmiri women have become victims of political violence and torture both directly and indirectly. It also challenges the larger socio-political dynamics that support their marginalization. The study also examines the legal and social

structures that have consistently denied Kashmiri women justice, looking at the militarized deadlock that hinders real accountability as well as the state's impunity for gender-based violence. In addition to that, this study also highlights the endurance of Kashmiri women, their role in sustaining households under harsh conditions, and their involvement in resistance movements despite the serious problems they face. Furthermore, it also aims to highlight the strength and suffering of women, who are often disregarded, by examining the intersection of gender, militarization, and political violence. By employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary theory, history, and literature, this research offers valuable perspectives on how Kashmiri literature tackles gendered nature of violence that is not given due attention. This paper makes use of qualitative research, interpretive paradigm and descriptive-analytical method to explore the suffering and resilience of Kashmiri women exhibited by Anglophone Kashmiri writers Basharat Peer and Shahnaz Bashir in their literary outpours.

**Key words**: Disappearances, torture, insurgency, state violence, resilience, sexual assault, psychological trauma.

## INTRODUCTION

Both literary and non-literary discourses document the history of war in Kashmir. The pervasive urgency of telling the tale of Kashmir can be gauged by looking at the approximate 70,000 deaths, and 8ooo (Roy, 115) disappearances that have occurred since 1989. The rising tide of this never-ending struggle forces Anglophone Kashmiri writers to recast stories of genocide, abductions and sexual crimes against women. Although there is a lot of violence in Kashmir, women and children are the ones who suffer the most from torture and physical assault. As a result, tales of women and children in the Kashmir valley demonstrating bravery and resilience in the face of a cruel military apparatus are usually ignored.

Basharat Peer's widely recognized frontline memoir *Curfewed Nights* provides the most perceptive account of the conflict in Kashmir when seen from the perspective of his upbringing and family situation. Kashmir, as depicted by the memoir, eludes "good stories"; rather, it offers only "difficult, ambiguous, and unresolved stories" (171). The book shows how committed Peer is in exposing the truth and showing respect for creative non-fiction. It showcases that women and children are most vulnerable to abuses both physical and torture. The most susceptible group to interethnic conflict, which can lie in the shadows of modern nations, is women, according to

journalist Basharat Peer. *Curfewed Nights* aims at bringing attention to the challenges Kashmiri women confront in coping with the social and political ramification of gendered violence. Peer's memoir stands out for its commitment to reporting, sincerity, and decency; the vignettes, in the book, are imbued with violent events being everyday occurrence.

Shahnaz Bashir is a fiction writer and scholar from Srinagar, Kashmir. Apart from his well-known novels, Bashir is also credited with creating the fascinating compendium of short stories *The Scattered Souls*, which is one of the most read literary productions in Kashmir. The terrible reality of brutality, trauma, forced migrations, kidnappings, abductions, and sexual violations are depicted in *The Scattered Souls* with unwavering honesty and precision. The book graphically illustrates the devastating effects of armed conflict on indigenous people's lives; it exposes the grim reality of life of native Kashmiris, particularly for women, in the subsequent events of India's occupation in 1988. Each of the short stories in *The Scattered Souls* expertly weaves together complex themes of violence, trauma, growing up under curfews, displacement, identity fracturing, and alienation from one's own living spaces. Through these poignant tales, the book gives the poor and voiceless indigenous women a strong voice; it highlights the mistreatment of Kashmiri women who are left to cope with the consequences of sexual abuse and the backlash from society.

Contemporary wars have defied the binaries of "public and private" (Cooke 15). The narratives woven by Kashmiri writers display that the division of space into dangerous areas that belong to men and safe areas that belong to women at home, is questioned because Kashmir conflict encroaches on non-militarized zones since counter insurgency started in the early part of 1990s. Since the conflict in Kashmir is considered "essentially a male arena", it is frequently associated with "hyper-masculine" (Chatterji 324) conflict with very little attention being paid to gender formulation in the armed conflict in Kashmir. The writers chosen for this study bridge the gaps in political and critical discourses where excluding gender as a category of analysis is often challenging. The contemporary literary discourse seeks to show that the civilian population, especially women, is the driving force behind the armed conflict in Kashmir; the literary oeuvres produced in Kashmir show how militarization affects Kashmir's social fabric in a way that is particular to each gender. These literary writings emphasize the significance of "gendered nature" of violence wrecked in the Valley.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Kashmir conflict is one of the most enduring and deeply ingrained conflicts in modern history; this struggle has had a lasting impact on the inhabitants of the Kashmir region. One of the most tragic aspects of the conflict is the plight of Kashmiri women whose children have been caught between militant activists and the Indian military. These women have seen firsthand the most horrifying and brutal ways in which children can be exploited, manipulated, blackmailed, and even forced to serve as carriers of explosives or grenades meant to be used against their own people as weapons of mass destruction. The custom of enlisting young boys for military service predates the history of warfare; but in Kashmir, this behavior has peaked in a particularly terrible way. Over the course of its ten years counterinsurgency operations, the Indian military has been accused of using Kashmiri youngsters as "human shields", messengers, and most concerning of all, as explosive device carriers. Threats of violence, small rewards, or other inducements either coerce or entice these boys who are usually too young to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions to take on these dangerous positions. The mothers of these boys experience unique kind of misery; the pain of seeing their own sons alienated from mothers and used as pawns in a battle against their own kins.

Basharat Peer highlights the most deplorable aspect of military occupation of Kashmir in *Curfewed Nights*. The exploitation of children and the plight faced by mothers of young children is the most poignant aspect of the whole occupation business. The fathers of most children are already killed or missing, the weight of losing a family falls on women. The widowed mothers have to raise children who do not have a normal life because the valley's schools are closed, and their yards are full of gunshots, grenades, and bombshells, and their properties are being confiscated for improvised military operations. In addition, witnessing youngsters who have lost limbs (or in most scenarios lives) is an agonizing sight. These are the children of war, as Peer depicts the horrific images of children caught in the violence of the conflict; the mothers of these children live in perpetual fear that their children might be forced to participate in activities that put their lives or the lives of fellow Kashmiris in peril. The stigma these women face from society is another issue; in Kashmir's close-knit communities, a son's involvement in such activities can lead to social ostracism, further isolating these women and compounding their pain.

A woman named Shameema's account is catalogued by Basharat Peer. Her adolescent boy named Shafi is enrolled in the local governmental school. She is told about abduction of both her

sons when she is busy in house chores. In a moment, Shameema accompanied by many other relative women, rushes towards the military camp established near Qabamarg. The soldiers attempt to stop the women, but they push and yell back. Shameema, bestowed with courage, marches ahead and combat every soldier who tries to stop her. Usually the very sight of armed soldiers incites fear in villagers, but that day, Shameema carries on until she sees the house where her sons are detained. Shameema sees Indian soldiers and Ikhwanis (the renegade militants) firing at the house. Shameema is informed by her younger son Bilal that Shafi (her older son) had been sent by the military inside the terrorist' home while "holding a mine" (*Curfewed Nights* 174) and Bilal is also being pushed to carry explosive material to the house hosting militants. Shameema tries to disengage her son Bilal from the grasp of soldiers; in that effort, she is hit badly by them. After giving Bilal a mine, a soldier pushes him in the direction of the militant's residence. Shafi's murder had traumatized Bilal who is on the verge of collapsing. Shameema narrates that "my heart was seized when I noticed Bilal's quivering hands gripping the mine". Shameema launches herself forward, grabs the mine from Bilal's hands, and asks the officer "to blow [her] up". Her resilience compels the soldiers to let them go; and she succeeds in freeing her son from the grasp of military. The painful memory of that night sticks to the family and leaves them sleepless. Three days after the murder of Shafi, his "last mourning ritual" is performed by the family.

Shameema has not only to tolerate the murder of her son Shafi; rather, she has to "imbibe the pain" of her surviving child (Akhtar et.al 108) who has become traumatic. The murder of Shafi has left indelible marks on his psyche. He is helpless as he grows up and is left with a damaged "emotional existence". Peer narrates that Shameema comforts Bilal, hugs him and pats him frequently. Bilal starts screaming and swearing quite often and frequently rushes to the house where Shafi is murdered; since, he cannot cope with the murder of his brother and leaves school because of the "psychiatric issues". Peer notices that he becomes irritated every time Shafi's name is brought up in his presence. Bilal seeks escape in smoking; when Bilal's condition worsens, Shameema ignites "hookah" and delivers to Bilal. Shameema sees her surviving son's deterioration; hence, she feels guilty for the condition of her son. She asks Peer "which mother would give her son a hookah? But, in order to soothe him, I must".

Kashmiri aesthetics exhibit a number of such personal narratives of the families who visit government offices for months at stretch in order to get "compensation" for their deceased

children, and who are only embroiled in bureaucratic red-tape that delay the payout for years (Peer 178); Shameema's family's turmoil is one such evidence. The time is painful for Shameema who has lost her older son and is unable to pay for the psychiatric treatment of her younger son whose personality is distorted by the harrowing murder of his beloved brother. Following the conclusion of the mourning period, the grieving mother is faced with other challenges imposed by poverty and ruined livelihoods in Kashmir. The bereaved family is told about state compensation "monetarily as well as with a job" (Peer 176) for a family member; hence, Shameema shuttles between the police station and the commissioner's office, and "painfully wades through" (179) excessively drawn-out bureaucratic procedures.

Basharat Peer laments, "The dirty war has drawn women into city squares" (Peer 135); he narrates the story of a seventy years old poor woman Noora, who lives in a run-down house. Her teenage son is abducted by the military from the playground and is driven off towards unknown destination. Noora's derelict kitchen ruled by darkness adds to her misery. She tells Peer that her boy "had not been home for eight years" (135). Her helplessness is heart-wrenching to see that she and her daughters "visited every police station, military base, and politician for many years" (Peer 136). She cries that "nobody listens to [them]". Afraid of the slander her daughters' be subjected to, she marries them off as she "could not keep on dragging them to camps and police stations. People talk" (136). Noora's expression is emotionless, and Peer narrates, as if she is tired of "telling her story again and again and never getting nowhere". Numerous reporters, including "foreigners" arrive to interview her; however, the boy has not returned. Peer also narrates the story of an elderly woman "whose son is slain right in front of her eyes". The old woman, since then, has lost association with her surroundings and cannot improve her health despite psychiatric treatment.

Kashmiri aesthetics highlight the sufferings of victim-survivors who earn the titles of "widows-in-waiting" (Akhtar et.al, 108). Within the confines of the four walls, the "half-widows" present a harsh portrait of personal tragedy; these are the women who cannot start afresh to lead a normal life. Peer foregrounds that Srinagar "is also about being hidden from view", as every street reminds of the people who are "missing". The abductions that culminate either in murder or "indefinite detention" of Kashmiri youth is a recurring phenomenon. Peer's memoir spotlights numerous parks providing shade to innumerable groups of women, wearing "white headbands and

placards" for their missing family members. According to Peer, the police, military, and paramilitary have reported that "between four and eight thousand men have disappeared after being arrested" (135) who are referred to as "missing persons" (135) in newspaper entries; their waiting wives are referred to as "half-widows". Peer goes on to write that government evades the responsibility and its role in these disappearances; rather, it persistently insists that the missing people have "joined militant organizations" across the border to receive armed training. Peer emphasizes that Indian government displays sheer lack of sensitivity in the matter and declines to form inquiry commission into the disappearances. The "missing persons", according to many Kashmiris, are tortured to death while under arrest and buried in mass graves.

These "widows in waiting" cannot give up to move on; rather, they are fervently pursuing justice in the hope that their loved ones will come back. The destiny of half-widows is unique in the sense that in addition to dealing with the stigma associated with being widowed, they also have to search for their husbands. There is no official social or financial assistance system in place and many young married women are left to rot in their homes fearing social rejection. Any hope of meeting justice is out of question as even FIRS are not lodged against the governmental bodies responsible for abductions. Shahnaz Bashir's character Sakeena, a half-widow ("Ex-Militant") has an incredibly terrifying story to tell because she is illiterate and has no economic support either from her parents or her in-laws. She is also not eligible for the state's "ex-gratia payment", which does little to lessen the financial burden or psychological trauma experienced by her, because her husband Ghulam Mohiuddin has not been formally pronounced deceased. She is unable to grieve appropriately or find peace since there is no "closure" (Akhtar et.al, 94) for her. Her psychiatrist's effort to reintegrate her in society meets refusal when she waves-off all options of starting a new life by remarrying, as she asserts that she "is still waiting" for her missing husband.

The Indian state's counterinsurgency is spreading beyond Srinagar's forests and streets into private realms as the political impasse with the insurgents turns into an unlawful battle. The sanctity of the home is violated frequently, as "the home" no longer remains "a safe haven" free from sexual assault. In the wake of 1990's counter insurgence, women have become the "direct targets" of sexual violence on the part of Indian state. Since the government's drive against freedom-fighters in the 1990s, military rape has been a regular occurrence in Kashmir. Kashmiri populace feels desperate and helpless when faced with a powerful military which no longer pursues

its male opponents in battlefield; rather, it views the entire Kashmiri people as adversaries (Kashmir Imprisoned 2002, 57). Kashmiri men are branded as "enemies" by Indian state, which sparks a horrifying campaign against them and the region's tragedy of gender-based human rights violations. In Kashmir, rape is "neither incidental not private" (Manchanda 2001, 73); rather, it has been routinely employed by security personnel as a tool of "punishment, coercion, intimidation, and degradation" (Manchanda 2001, 73). In 1993 report on Kashmir Asia Watch confirms that the civilian population is routinely subjected to collective punishment through sexual crimes committed by security forces. The forces employ rape as a tool to target women they believe have sympathies with militant groups; by raping these women, they hope "to punish and degrade the entire community" (Rape in Kashmir 1993, 1). The women are not only subjected to **"**routine questioning and harassment" (Ramachandra 2003, 18) from soldiers but are subjected to sexual exploitation.

Kashmiri men can only watch and do nothing while Indian soldiers rifle through the chambers of young women, defile them, and ridicule their fathers and brothers. This demonstrates the brutal efficiency with which the military appropriates traditional constructs of "honor" in Kashmir; people do not fear conflict or even death, but they cannot stand to be denigrated by the military when their family women are used to degrade them. However, it is exceedingly difficult-nearly impossible- to avoid the potential of sexual revenge against women. Though the militant movement in Kashmir has been effective in opposing the Indian state and it's monopoly of violence, it is unable to withdraw the military's sexual assault on Kashmiri women. Therefore, there are very strong political reasons for keeping Kashmiri women outside the purview of the "war story".

Basaharat Peer has produced spectral commentary on the mass-rape that afflicts "more than twenty women in 1990" (Peer 160) in Kunanposhpora, village in the northern Kupwara. Peer's narrative highlights the political nature of the heinous crime committed against Kashmiri people and exposes the impunity laws of Indian state when Indian military surrounds the village in an attempt to find insurgents. Subsequently, the Indian government drops the accusations made by rape victims. Basharat Peer sees it as "a symbol, a metaphor, and a memory like Srebrenica" (160) where the whole village is "broken down" through women's degradation. The resistance of the freedom fighters is diluted through "rape as a political weapon". Susan Brownmiller, who

theorized rape in her book *Against our Will* states that when an oppressive military force harasses women of the oppressed nation, "the sheer intoxication of the triumph" is merely one aspect of the strategy. Brownmiller sees sexual harassment as an integral part "of recognizable pattern of national terror and subjugation" (40). Beyond a general disdain for women's bodily integrity, the first inclination to harass them does not require a complex political purpose; but "sexual assault in warfare has a military effect as well as an impulse". In violent conflicts, the effect of sexual crimes against women is that of "intimidation and demoralization for the victim's side" (40). Brownmiller considers rape of the women of the crushed people "to be part of the enemy's conscious effort to destroy them". Even though, it has components of all the forgoing, the defilement of these over twenty Kashmiri women as depicted by Peer "is qualitatively different from bombs that miss their military targets" (Brownmiller); this is also different from impersonal looting and burning of property, planned ambushes, mass slaughter, and torture during interrogation of the opponents. Rape is, as Susan Brownmiller calls, "more than just a sign of violence in war time", it is a "common act with common justification" (Brownmiller). These numerous women who have had their body integrity violated are not only "regrettable victims" or "coincidental, inevitable causalities- much like civilian bombing victims who are grouped together with crops, homes, children, and personal belongings. The turmoil in Kashmir provides the rapists with "an ideal psychological setting" in which to express their disdain for women; the women become "instrumental" in war-game played between men on both sides. Hence Brownmiller reiterates, that men's long-held suspicion, that women are "peripheral" (Brownmiller 32), unimportant to the world at large, and merely passive observers of the activities in the center ring, is confirmed by the naked force of weapons only available to men" (Brownmiller 32)..

In Kashmir, military officers of high rank are not engaged with this kind of sexual molestation; rather, "rape as compensation is made available for the foot soldiers" (96 Brownmiller). As the foot soldiers fight a war they do not comprehend and are constantly in danger of losing their lives; since, they are the ones who need to be "mollified and pacified" (Brownmiller 97). It is this "mollification" factor, and not some "intrinsic male urge" that prompts rape in militarized zones. Apart from being a "bold pattern of national subjugation" (Brownmiller 40), the systematic violation of women in Kashmir by Indian military**,** conforms to a retrospective analysis of the ultimate wipeout of an integrated family structure.

Minor girls who tend sheep, goats and gather firewood in forests, or walk to school often experience sexual harassment. There are several reports of small girls "who capture the attention" (Manchanda 2001, 88) and are singled out by local military officers and called to military detention centers to be molested. Basharat Peer highlights the torturous experience of women subjected to sexual violence in Mubeena's vignette in his memoir *Curfewed Nights*. Rashid Malik, a village youth, along with his relatives, is on his way back to his village escorting his bride Mubeena. The convoy is attacked by the Indian military; Rashid's cousins Sabbzaar, and Abdullah are killed in several rounds of bullets by Indian military. Rashid is also hit badly and later on doctors discover five gunshots in Rashid's back. Mubeena and her maids are "dragged by a group of soldiers to the mustard fields" besides the road and violated by innumerable number of soldiers. Mubeena shares the horrendous experience with Basharat Peer as, "I could not even remember how many they were. I had lost my senses' (*Curfewed Nights* 158). She is struck by three gunshots in her hips, back, and shoulders and is incessantly bleeding. According to an independent investigative assessment, such dehumanizing treatment of Kashmiri women by security personnel has caused "the most resentment amongst the Valley's residents of all the atrocities committed against the population**"** (Kashmir Imprisoned 2002, 56).

In addition to this "monopolized violence" of the state's armed apparatuses, "the everyday violence of patriarchy goes on" as observed by Kesic (2000, 26). In addition to exposing "the use of rape as a weapon of war", Basharat Peer's account of Mubeena questions the patriarchal code of "honor" that condemns rape but does not challenge "the social norms that push rape survivors into social exiles" (Kesic, 28). The story illustrates that these women are subjected to a perennial torture and stain. The ravished women are received adversely by the community of aggressed against; these rape victims are not usually given a warm welcome and people usually turn away in "revulsion" (Brownmiller 40**)** from the violated sisters and daughters. Mubeena's personal account illustrates that the family of the violated women places a heavy responsibility for the horrible incident on violated women. Mubeena and her husband, after getting treatment and recovery from their physical injuries, return home, where they were greeted with "hostile silence". The fate of Mubeena is terrible in a social context when the targets of shame and ostracism are not their perpetrators but rather the aggressed against women. Mubeena is, as Rita Ramachandra mentions, "victimized by more than one aggressor- the rapist and their own society" (20). The social backlash against the molested women since 1991, symbolized by the character of Mubeena, is relentless.

The family considers Mubeena a "bad omen", who is culpable for the death of two cousins and injuries of ten family members. She is vehemently rejected by her in-laws. Rashid's injury has left him physically impaired; hence, the couple is driven to destitution. Rashid's intention to sell his inherited portion of the land is also rejected by his family. Military rape takes advantage of the way society constructs "honor", which is centered on controlling female sexuality and rigorously adhering to the social norms of "virginity and chastity". So she, like many other tortured women, does not have protection from either the state or their immediate family. Mubeena bows her head as she waits in line for water at the village tap. She "moves like smoke" through the village's streets as she makes an effort to blend in. She avoids mingling with villagers for the fear of argument which can serve as a trigger for her pain. Mubeena is routinely subjected to painful interrogation such as, "You are the one that got raped, right? "Are you the one who brought bad omen, don't you"? Mubeena tells Basharat Peer that her husband and she are nicknamed as "crossfire bride and crossfire groom".

In the context of all this dehumanization, the routine operations of military goes on; the military check posts function as usual. Tortured, tormented women and their collapsed families do not affect the rapist soldiers. Life goes on for them as usual; military torture policies go on uninterrupted. Mubeena, however, cannot overcome the trauma of the torture, after many years of the incident, she still gets shivers when she sees "a uniform". Her wedding night becomes "a ghost hanging around her" (159). Mubeena's misery compounds with every passing day; she endures taunts from her in-laws, neighbors, and village people while "sewing, tailoring, and helping out on the farms". The torture she undergoes, is responsible for the death of her newly born son who dies in a few weeks. The death of her baby exacerbates her stress and she becomes "suicidal". On a social level, rape survivors like Mubeena, confront an insensitive, even hostile societal environment. These victims are viewed like prostitutes since they are deemed undesirable by society. The people never forgive them. Mubeena's story reveals, "Women are expected to serve their communities/countries not by fighting wars as soldiers, but by "preserving" their sexual purity for the "honor" of their male relatives" (Lori Handrahun 2004). In this story, Mubeena must prove her "sexual purity" while also bearing the "shame" of being a "rape victim"; she is caught between the demands of "ethno-patriarchalism and religious codes" (Akhtar 110).

Shahnaz Bashir in his short story "Ex-Militant" illustrates the trauma faced by a woman Sakeena because of gang-rape committed by Indian soldiers. Sakeena is married to Ghulam Mohiuddin, a youth of adequate education who marries Sakeena out of love. His past association with "freedom movement" earns him notoriety in Sakeena's parents' eyes; hence, the couple proceeds to get married in a court room. The couple leads a contented life and shower love and respect on each other. Because of low employment possibilities in Kashmir, Ghulam owns his autorikshaw and earns well. On complaint of a renegade – "a counter-insurgent", Ghulam is targeted by the military. He is taken for "indefinite detention" whereas his vehicle is confiscated. Sakeena is, in her husband's absence, attacked by soldiers who enter under the pretext of searching for her husband.

Sakeena's corporeal fragility aggravate her vulnerability. The juxtaposition of fragile, feminine bodily constitution with "hyper-masculinity" offered by "uniform" lends itself readily to her violation. A contingent of not less than five soldiers cordon off the shanty; she is further traumatized and terrorized by the presence of strangers holding guns and grenades, in her house. The "hyper-masculine" (Chatterji 89) posturing of soldiers display that these strangers have the right to invade her house and use their weapons against her. She becomes a "vulnerable victim" in her own house. However, this "hubristic display of the military might" and hegemonic military presence is "a tactic" employed in order to smash the will of the nation; hence, the occupation of the Valley is tantamount to securing "constant control over people's public and private lives" (Nakhlava 6). Kashmiri women, in the wake of the counterinsurgency, have lost not only their traditional recreational spaces in public sphere, but also their private sphere within the enclosed terrains of their houses. Due to a constant threat of rape, their outer movement is restricted; encaged in their houses, they are denied the right to get involved in social interaction. Furthermore this "loss of open spaces" is deemed "the worst loss for women" (Akhtar et.al, 103)**.** The soldiers have taken control of Sakeena's house in entirety; her effort, to turn on the light, is met with furious invectives. They shoot into the walls of house, tear up the floor, upset the haystacks, and destroy the couple's meagre property. In the faint light filtering in from the street, she sees four soldiers headed by "a masked boy" who has barged into her bedroom; while a couple of soldiers stand sentinel at the shanty's door. These uniformed men "are ordinary people made extraordinary by entry into the most exclusive male-only club" in the ravaged world (Brownmiller 32). An open display of armament bestows "power undreamed of" in their day to day life; hence, violating

people's right to body integrity becomes more substantial than protecting people's lives in Kashmir. The war becomes an "opportunity" to display their "newly won superiority" to the world. Brownmiller states that using the ploy of "victory", war gives these men "a tacit license to rape"; hence, rape in war unveils men's psyche in its naked form, without the trapping of "chivalry, or civilization" (33). Sakeena is insulted, whipped and defiled by force; she is strapped to bed and repeatedly ravished by uniformed men. The violent intrusion proves to be "the secret of men's effective control over her" (Brownmiller 14), the "pinnacle of their power, and the validation of their manhood" (Brownmiller 14).

In Kashmir, rape emerges as a major social justice issue. Uniformed men use "a deliberate intimidation" tactic as their only means of keeping women in a state of terror" (15); Kashmir has seen a "female fear of an open season of rape" during 1990s (Brownmiller 16). Sakeena, the protagonist of Shahnaz Bashir's short story, "The Ex-Militant", is assaulted and the sexual violation is not an uncoordinated group action. She finds herself helpless after she recovers from the stupor. She wants to hide the "shame", but the blood and her torn clothing, do not conceal the abuse from the gaze of villagers. The soldiers leave the site of crime remorseless, as if they are safe from juridical prosecution. The repressive state discredit, and openly deny the existence of sexual violations against women of Kashmir and is implicated in the "politics of honor" (Vardarjan 1993, 6). The lack of an investigation and punishment for sexual crimes is a result of military's pressure on the local people to refrain from filing a First Information Report on behalf of victims. Sakeena's neighbors know about the assault and do not help her file report against the military. The neighbors race to the shack as soon as the troop leave and notice Sakeena lying on the floor, "stripped and unconscious"; she is wrapped in a blanket by a neighbor woman. For the coming years, Sakeena is rabid and the memory of the event is a torment for every moment of that very day and coming days of her life. Neither she, nor anyone from the village, knows of where Ghulam has been kept. Sakeena's state of mind deteriorates; she is taken by her neighbors to the Government Psychiatric hospital where she receives treatment for more than six years.

Shahnaz Bashir's character Sakeena's life narrative is scattered over three short stories, illustrating three different phases of her post-rape life. The short story "The Psychosis" illustrates the insensitivity of the society which treats her nothing better than "a fallen women". The story illustrates that "half-widows" become even more susceptible to predatory violence when they do

not have male support in their families. Sakeena, who resides in a one-room shanty with her children, is surrounded by a gloomy and dismal world. She works as a cleaner during the day and turns to sleeping medications at night for their numbing comfort. Sakeena is harassed by Rasheed, the grocery store owner, who waits for Sakeena's arrival and sees her presence as a sign of sexual availability. He interrupts a customer's transaction and informs Sakeena about her "favorite soap". His flirtatious advancement towards Sakeena is threatening to her, which she ignores out-rightly but he insists on getting attention and says, "I thought I would inform you". Rasheed persistently chases Sakeena even in the face of her constant refusal. He offers to give her grocery "for free". Rashid and his cohort demonstrate deep interest in Sakeena while they keep smoking. As she walks past the store, Rasheed bends over the candy jars and "giggles softly and suggestively" and subjects her to piercing gaze. The conservative social and political environment in Kashmir makes it almost impossible for the ravaged women like Mubeena *(Curfewed Nights*) and Sakeena ("The Psychosis") to establish informal or formal structures of support.

The military colonization leave behind widespread cruelty and communal trauma, which precipitates a shocking mental health epidemic in the valley. The psychological toll that shatter families' fate is very severe. According to DasGupta, women constitute the biggest group of "high risk as far as trauma" (DasGupta 2000, 39) following the disappearances of husbands and sons is concerned. The majority of the cases of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and psychosomatic disorders are found preponderantly in women.

In addition to that, women have to bear the responsibility of raising their children, as single parent, in the absence of their "missing" or dead husbands. The lamentable problem of "half-widows" suffering in Kashmir is also reflected in the profound psychological and emotional wounds suffered by Sakeena in the story "The Psychosis". Her sufferings are prolonged and made worse by the state's silence and inaction over her disappeared husband. Sakeena, the protagonist, is en route to the sole hospital i.e. the government hospital dedicated to psychiatric diseases. For the past six years, she has been going to the place where she waits for her turn in a long line. Since, the sexual assault, her mind is ravaged by the post-rape trauma and is being treated for her "queer seizures and cycloid psychosis". Sakeena's husband's death is not confirmed, so she is not legally "a widow", and is unable to move on with her life. Sakeena personifies the consequences that outflow from the impunity laws practiced by oppressive state against women.

Sakeena's rape and her husband's abduction propel her into mental hospital where she is diagnosed with "acute onset of confusion, delusions, hallucinations, altered behavior, pan anxiety, elation, happiness or ecstasy of high degrees". Self-blaming and mood swings are so severe that "with her bleeding, razor-nicked wrists - she has to be literally tied to her bed in the general ward". Her psychological disorder is so austere that the hospital arranges for her transfer to asylum section. Sakeena's nights are tormented; she cannot sleep. The recurring nightmares show her "body rolling down the riverbank". Her sleep is punctuated by visions of "her bloody shalwar"; the "smell of sperm barely leaves [her], even pleasantly scented thing smell dirty" to her. Her sleep is also disturbed by dreams of her lost husband who appears frequently and directs her to take care of their daughter Insha. Sakeena remains hospitalized for a year where she gives birth to a son "Bilal" whose fatherhood is precarious and a further source of her trauma.

In addition, Kashmiri mothers must deal with the pain of raising children who are the product of sexual assault, or "bad blood" (Blokland et al. 2). The story "Psychosis" exposes a detrimental correlation between raped mothers' experiences of sexual violence and their children's well-being. The mother's mental health issues, including signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, act as a mediating factor in this relationship. For instance, traumatized mothers interact with their children in a more invasive and hostile manner and to be less available, involved, and sensitive. The development of a secure attachment bond is called into question by these impacted exchanges. In the instance of Sakeena's son Bilal, a correlation has been established between the symptoms of posttraumatic disorder in the mother and the unorganized or insecure attachment styles of her child Bilal.

Sakeena's son Bilal's birth is linked to abuse committed by no less than five soldiers. Even though Bilal never meets the father and is innocent of the crime; yet, Sakeena associates the boy's identity with that of the rapist father/s because of the child's constant reminder of the sexual violence. The story is an explicit demonstration where "feelings of rejection and hatred" alternate with feelings of maternal affiliation for an innocent child. Occasionally at night, she gently pulls him in close and envelop him in the cozy quilt. At times she wants to stroke his hair for an instant; but as her fingers move forward instinctively, she withholds her hand. She sighs, "Bilal" as she reclines onto her back. Silent tears trickle down her cheeks. This ambivalence poses a risk to the

development of a stable attachment bond which is a prerequisite in the mother-child interaction and well-being of the child.

Furthermore, the story "Psychosis" also illustrates that being a victim of sexual violence increases women's risk of social exclusion and rejection, particularly when the abuse results in pregnancy. The community's response serves as a cultural conduit for the mother and the child's ongoing stress and suffering. The story "Psychosis" offers innumerable instances of both physical abuse and "infanticide" attempted by the mother. She occasionally exaggerates the child's animosity; in her instance, this ambivalence results in "unpredictable, sometimes even violent parenting" (5). Sakeena finds it really difficult to bond with the child. She wants to get rid of him because she is unable to hold him in her arms. In reality, she wants to "kill" her child. The issues are neglected and abuse of child with "disconnection and depression" at the core of it all (5). She strikes him quite often. Whenever she witnesses Bilal fiddling with his sister's pencil she finds it "hard to resist the urge to slap him. "What a bastard!" she repeats in her mouth. Because he is "a terrible memory in human face". She has even attempted to kill him before. Often she leaves him alone for long time at home, let him to go around the shanty and eat any lethal stuff, or swallow "green packet of rat poison" from the window ledge, or cut himself with the knife lying openly unsheathed in kitchen. She even leaves him unattended so that he might "pass away" from "the sheer terror of spending hours alone". Bilal's half-sister, Insha takes care of Bilal in every way and shields him from "the worst enemy-his mother". Sakeena is unable to feel sympathy for the boy and fails to acknowledge the child's needs; he is perceived as the "enemy's child" who agitates or provokes the mother, not as a person with needs" (5).

Although her health care- provider Dr. Imroz treats Sakeena's psychosis professionally and humanely but he is not equipped to offer "specific trauma-focused intervention" for the child. A psychiatrist, well equipped with methodology and aware of the significance of "attachment therapy", "psycho-education" is unavailable in the impoverished Valley; hence, no one is there to address the feeling of shame and guilt faced by both Sakeena and her even more offended child. Sakeena believes that she is "dirty" and that she has been violated, yet she frequently feels bad about not being the "mother she would like to be" (6).

Sexual violence against women is a surreptitious topic in a traditional society like Kashmir; particularly the act of bearing and rearing a child born of violence is considered "a stigma".

Mothers from communal cultures who are isolated, like Sakeena, often miss their wider family setup; they yearn to be supported and welcomed by their family members. Mothers avoid reintegration in their communities for fear of social rejection. Although Dr. Imtiaz tries to assist Sakeena to get reintegrated into the social set up and help her in creating a social support system with her family and friends; yet she refuses to remarry. Dr. Imtiaz's interventions focus on mending relationship with Sakeena's family and restoring the social fabric by pulling her out of isolation and equip her to combat stigmatization; yet the cultural taboos make it almost impossible. Her wider social setup fails to make her realize that her psychological issues are not "unique" to her and that her child is not a replica of "rapist father/s", but rather an inalienable part of her, and that embracing the child is crucial to her own and her child's well-being. This realization can allow "raped mother" to respond, to be more empathetic, express love, lessen hostility, and concentrate on the emotional growth of her son Bilal.

The short story "A Photo with Barak Obama" touches on another substantial issue i.e. the psychiatric problems of the "stigmatized" child Bilal. Sakeena- the rape-victim, is too disturbed to seek medical help for her son's behavioral problems or to seek protective services for him. The child's difficulties with impulse-control, relationships, and his psychiatric problems are too unreal for her. The story illustrates how difficult the mother's relationship with her child is, and that the child's origins have become the sources of his identity and torment. Eventually, the challenges of tending to the children born of rape and growing closer to them is very seldom taken up seriously by the community ravaged by a protracted conflict. In an impoverished setting such as Kashmir, "the stigma" attached to such children is not questioned. The violated mother is too deranged to "answer inquiries from her child" about his father; hence, she is unable to foster "a stable bond" with her son. As no attempt is made to resolve the mother's ambivalence about the child; hence she views herself and her child as "dirty", or someone she should be ashamed of. The main issue in this love/hate relationship is the guilt that is simultaneously present. She hates the child after feeling affection for him. In this stigmatized environment, the child is denied "acceptance, and affection"; the "raped mother" and the child in the story do not get the communal support they severely need.

The horrendous legacy of militarization is faced by Bilal in its entirety; his trauma is altogether different from the trauma suffered by other children of "missing fathers" as depicted in

the story "A Photo". Bilal, is a social outcast who "cherishes his solitary expeditions" as they afford him to "understand himself and his existence in the world a little better". He cannot come to terms with "the guilt of his being" and want to stay alone to "make sense of the absurdity of his loneliness". Bilal complains that his mother "never truly understood the things he went through", being a "bastard"- the social ostracism he faces from his classmates and the neighbors. He cannot forgive the "extra punishments that he is forced to endure" at school. The isolation forced by the mosque management committee which tries constantly to prevent him from visiting the house of God, suggesting that illegitimate persons desecrate mosque and the book of Allah. The aggression developed by social rejection turns Bilal into a "stone-pelter". He feels that he has "more justification than anyone else to throw stones"; above all he wants to stone "his own life which is riddled with slander". In addition to being a "masochistic" person, stone pelting becomes a revenge strategy for him; he wants to stone "the face of the soldiers, whoever the five men who had raped his mother". He masters the skill of weighing stones, looking at their proportions and texture, and assessing their roughness and edges before lobbing them. It feels like he is "releasing a weight every time he throws a stone" ("A Photo").

Peerzada Ashiq (2004) informs that numerous young men have been killed, maimed, imprisoned, or permanently relocated in Kashmir after 1990's counterinsurgency. Conversely, other young men have left Kashmir in search of employment, education, or other prospects, or they have joined militancy. Women's active and assertive public participation continues in the home sphere, where traditional gender norms are politicized in an attempt to protect and defend the family against a powerful counteroffensive by the Indian state. Women's roles as "mothers, sisters, and daughters" coexist with their roles as political opposition agents. The majority of the males are forced to go underground, particularly in the parts of the forest where almost all of the militants live. It is fascinating that women take part in public demonstrations, not just because they do so to protect their male family members; they have also started taking on the job of family head lately, which is another reason why they are in the forefront of a protest. These women are "currently engaged with family matters and the reality of family life" (Vijayan 2004). The Association of the Parents of the Disappeared reports that there are at least one thousand "half-widows" and perhaps twenty thousand widows in Kashmir whose spouses have "disappeared" and left no trace of their presence (DasGupta 2000, 35). Kashmir's landscape is dotted with widows'

hamlets and villages and these widows have to cater to the economic demands of their family members.

The prolonged and possibly permanent absence of male breadwinner is significantly hazardous to women belonging to poor economic background; since the loss of a male relative has detrimental effect on family's finances. Due to their incapacity to support themselves socially and economically disadvantaged women are exposed to still more vulnerabilities. Their fiscal impuissance is exacerbated by the state's ongoing refusal to take responsibility for the disappearances, which causes grief and agony for these women and their families.

"The Psychosis" represents a ravished Kashmir where Indian forces are pitted against the Valley's male inhabitants and condemns the region's female survivors to a life of suffering and instability. Sakeena searches for Ghulam Mohiuddin by pounding on doors to army camps, detention facilities, and jails. She learns that he has been sighted at the detention center in Sonawari. When she approaches the camp in-charge, she is directed to arrange one hundred thousand rupees for sharing intelligence about her husband; failing which she is asked to "sleep with them". Unable to locate her husband, Sakeena seeks work as a home aide to make ends meet. She makes meagre money even after back-grinding job. Her efforts to obtain government benefits are thwarted because she lacks any proof of her husband's passing.

Sakeena's problems do not end with search for her missing husband. She has to work in the hope of earning enough money to send her children to school, but she cannot afford to do that; she relies on the doctors' generosity to support herself and her children. Her only daughter, Insha, is married off, at a very tender age, to a peasant. Sakeena begins stitching clothes at home ("A Photo"). Additionally, she is living at the psychiatrist's mercy, Dr. Imtiaz. Following Sakeena's denial of the governmental "promised rehabilitation" in Boatman colony, she, along with her son Bilal, moves to a makeshift house provided by Dr. Imtiaz.

A number of books and stories discuss various facets of the struggles Kashmiri women experience, even though there is not a single literary work that specifically addresses how single women are portrayed in the region against the backdrop of armed conflict. There are short stories by Shahnaz Bashir that deal primarily with the themes of sacrifice, sufferings, and resilience; they may not all directly address the economic hardships of single women. "The Gravestone", a short story by Shahnaz Bashir, depicts the hardships and daily lives of common Kashmiri women against

the background of hostilities. The story touches on how women also bear the weight of these hardships, frequently discreetly and with remarkable perseverance. The story depicts the harsh economic conditions of a family whose only young son has been abducted and murdered in detention center by the military and the daughters of the house have to make economic arrangements for the upkeep of the household. The carpenter Muhammad Sultan, is the renowned maker of "Khatamband" and wood design. Sultan does not harbor love for money; rather, he is "a determined artist" and not "a time-bound" carpenter. The villagers appreciate his skill and believe that Sultan possesses "hands worth a lot of gold". All his customers are flabbergasted by his art which is unique in combining ancient and modern methods to produce art that Kashmiris with a taste for art love. He has mastered the most difficult of art domain i.e. doors and windows. For Sultan, carpentry is not only a source of sustenance but "an artistic activity" which he cherishes extremely.

But Sultan is afflicted severely by the oppression forced on Kashmiris by Indian state; hence, he devoutly supports "Azadi movement" and sympathizes with its activist. He "disappears for days on end", only to return to fulfill his commitments with his clients. His "second passion", after woodworking, is patrolling the hamlet with militants. In addition to getting them cigarettes and lending them money, he helps them in any way he can. Sultan loses one of his arms as a result of a scuffle with military and the state of his arm incapacitate Sultan. His financial situation deteriorates as a result of his weak grip over his tools.

Sultan's deteriorating financial condition effects his daughters immensely. His oldest daughter is "sent back by her in-laws for the sixth time in their four years of marriage" for not paying the appropriate dowry. She is battered by her in-laws for lack of a strong backing. The story "Gravestone" illustrates that she is sent to her father's house with "a swollen wrist" and a "sniveling sick one-year-old baby girl". Sultan's younger two unmarried daughters have to shoulder the responsibility for arranging finances of the family. Since her father's injury, his middle daughter, a completely illiterate spinster in her late forties, supports the family with her stitching skills. She is "overstressed, over-exhausted and gains weight". The immense burden makes her insomniac and she gets premature wrinkles on her face despite being an extraordinarily pretty girl. As the Valley embroils in the wave of violence and as she becomes short on work lately, she resorts to begging on Fridays at the shrine of Makhdoom sahib. In order not to sully "the

family's honor" she hides herself in a "long, filthy black burka"; on every Friday, she leaves the house, and "pretend to be heading to the shrine to pray to God". Although Sultan suspects and does not appreciate "the true purpose of her veiled expeditions", yet he has no choice other than closing his eyes towards her contributions and sacrifices for the family. Sultan's youngest daughter leaves secondary school after her mother died of a colon hemorrhage. Since her mother's death, she has been responsible for the upkeep of the house. The youngest daughter is illiterate and diffident; she is reputed to be "such a quiet person in the family" that even her own father never noticed her. Bashir comments that, "she was just like a family cow she fed, washed, milked, and cleaned". She has the habit of hiding her misery and never uttered a sound when she cried; instead, "her tears fell silently down her cheeks like melting pearls".

Prostitution and sexual harassment are also associated with the prolonged military occupation of Kashmir, especially in the remote border settlements. Young girls and women who have lost male family members are frequently the prey of their male bosses and coworkers who act as "predators" and harass them. Due to the conflict's widespread destruction of educational infrastructure and the financial struggles families confront, female education has been significantly affected, making it difficult for young girls to participate in the workforce in positions of empowerment. The short story "Theft" by Shahnaz Bashir addresses the theme of uneasiness and insecurity in a world where male laborers predominate. Sakeena's daughter- Insha works as a salesgirl and sells a variety of clothing items in a big shopping mall. Due to the lack of financial resources, she is unable to meet her basic needs and longs to be "like some of her customers", she regularly serves. Her life has grown difficult because she now has to support her family in addition to herself. She does not have "some time off for herself and enjoy stroll through Lal Chowk" since she has to make both ends meet by indulging in a back-breaking labor in the clothing store. Since, she is "inscrutable", Insha questions why she is unable to obtain a well-paying position in government sector. At the work place, Insha has to fend herself against notoriety stuck to her family's name. Insha realizes that girls like her, "whose brother is this and that, whose mother is prematurely aging, and whose father was an ex-militant", would never be able to escape their fate in Kashmir. Insha laments that "for daughters of ex-militants" and "raped mothers" opportunities for economic growth are further curtailed. In an extended monologue, she gives vent to her unease at "sexual harassment" she occasionally suffers at work place. She enlightens the readers that she is denied the "male protection" in a traditional cloistered society and must constantly "remind

someone of your favors". Because of her financial hardship, she is frequently asked to "wash somebody's dirty tumblers", which she is unable to refuse.

Insha is occasionally "delegated to peddling the out-of-demand items" such as "expired cosmetics and defective designer jewelry, at cheap rates", and she is forced to act patronizingly because she is unable to remind her boss that all these tasks "are not covered by her employment agreement". Even after being assigned several errands, including "fetching cigarettes from the paanwala across the road and bear his teasing", Insha is unable to file a complaint. She is instructed to sell all "old-fashioned merchandise" and put all of her energy into completing all of the tasks not even mentioned in the contract. She is placed in "the cuddle of onlookers, knots of gossiping government employees in the tea-stalls, among the cynical staff of private schools". When Insha is accused of stealing from the shop where she works, she starts feeling anxious and uneasy. The theft charge sends her at the end of her wits and she wishes she "had died the day she was born… or the day [she] was thrown out of school… . or the day [her] father vanished….or the day [her] mother was raped, or the day [her] house was dismantled on the riverside". Her wages are frequently curtailed just because she "couldn't keep well for a day or two"; hence, she is forced to bear exploitation with no hope of redress.

The role of women in politics and in protesting the Indian military's occupation and presence in Kashmir is highlighted in Kashmiri literary writings. Although women are frequently depicted in media as mute recipients of violence; yet, Kashmiri women have taken an active role in resistance movements. The memoir by Basharat Peer depicts daily life in Kashmir, which is rife with war, as well as the proactive part that women play in resistance. Peer describes female activist and protestors who, in spite of personal setbacks, take to streets. The significance of women's contributions to the "Azadi" movement is acknowledged in the book. Numerous such women – often "half-mothers" or half-widows" are acknowledged as they use their grief to lessen the pain of other victims. Their requests for information, regarding the whereabouts of their loved ones, and their protests against the military's conduct, are reflected in the memoir. The book not only describes the horrific incident but also the brave women who have fought for accountability, broken the silence, and pursued justice. It focusses on how Kashmiri women have used their trauma to fuel activism by defying both the military occupation but also social pressures to keep silent. As a national daily reports shows that the first wave of conflict during the early years of

1991, "was centered on Srinagar"; during this wave thousands of people marched through streets. The protestors included women of all ages (The Hindu 1990, 7). A growing number of Muslim women from Kashmir, primarily college and high school students protest against "Indian Occupation" of Jammu and Kashmir. These protests are also against purported crimes committed by security forces against the local populace. Separate groups of thousands of them descend on Srinagar's streets over the course of many days, clashing with police or making concerted attempt to march to "the UN Military Observer's office" (The Hindu 1990, 7) in hopes of getting the international organization to step in and help resolve the Kashmir dispute. The political mobilization of Kashmiri women is also noticed and highlighted by Rita Manchanda who sees women's political resistance as assuming "a cultural expression". She writes, "Heavily swathed in burqas or in voluminous head-scarves, mothers, wives and daughters come pouring out into the streets, their voices joining that of the men in the cry for Azadi" (2001, 50).

Although women continue to be excluded from mainstream politics, a group of appropriately five hundred female workers established in 1986 operates as a humanitarian organization in Srinagar in response to the human rights' violations in Kashmir. Educated women, preponderantly doctors or lawyers, join such groups, and support cause of freedom. In addition to arranging widow's marriages and giving orphans financial support to complete their studies, they also maintain the public cemetery, looked after the burial sites, and assist the bereaved relatives.

In his memoir, *Curfewed Nights*, Peer describes one such courageous woman, Parveena Ahangar, whose adolescent son Javed is abducted following an army raid in 1990. The missing boy is speech impaired. To support and defend their cause in court, the homemaker and attorney Pervez Imroz establishes "the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons" with the help of Parveena. Her personal interest in the Association has made it "practically unbeatable". She spends her time assisting the families of other missing adolescents by providing legal advice and charitable schools for children. She wavers between speaking to an audience in an auditorium at one time, and flying into Srinagar airport to attend an international conference at another. This courageous lady provides legal assistance to the parents of missing children as well as counselling to them while "holding back her tears". Peer notes that each time he sees Parveena, she is accompanied by a different woman whose husband or son has disappeared; she cares for everyone as if they were "her own mothers, holding, consoling, correcting, and motivating them". Peer

further mentions that "grieving old men speak to her as though she were a saint" (136). Young rakish boys sit on ground, heads down in order to show reverence to her. Reporters stop to greet her and enthusiastically offer to provide help in recording any event. Peer believes that "very few males earn this much love and reverence" (136) as Parveena has garnered. Hiding her own grief, sitting on a rug in her drawing room, Parveena, "arranges a hundred times the court files and photos" of other missing people. Peer writes that the government offered to give Parveena money as compensation for her missing son but she refuses stoically and refuses to "sell [her] son for any amount" (137). Although fewer people have vanished since Parveena launched her campaign, disappearances yet persist. Every time the military and police alert the public to the discovery of an unidentified body, Parveena has to attend numerous calls of the parents of missing persons and rushes to offer condolence as well as juridical support.

## CONCLUSION

In the tapestry of Kashmiri aesthetics, women's portrayal goes beyond simple victimization; instead, they become symbols of strength and agency against institutionalized oppression. Basahar Peer and Shahnaz Bashir's stories present an intersection of torture and anguish which draws attention to the horrific impact of political violence while also underscoring the deep psychological and emotional scars Kashmiri women face. Nevertheless, despite these terrifying encounters, these women do not give up, and reclaim their identities and their unwavering spirit against an oppressive power structure that wants to silence them. The stories present "half-mothers" and "half-widows" whose loved ones are detained indefinitely without charge or trail. Their families are on the verge of grinding poverty due to the males' extended absence. Furthermore these women are frequently let down by the legal system since they cannot obtain government assistance, property rights, or inheritance without death certificate for their absentee husband. Their precarious legal situation makes their social and economic problems worse. In addition to that, these women have to bear of pain of their physically or psychologically impaired children who suffer from the loss of a parent as well as the social and economic unrest brought on by their mother's poor circumstances. The feminist perspective emphasizes how crucial it is to acknowledge women's particular suffering in conflict areas, particularly in Kashmir, where gendered violence is used as a weapon of war. But the literary landscape presents women who are unique in turning their misery into a tool for self-assertion and survival. Kashmiri Anglophone

writers pay tribute to the tenacity, optimism, and unwavering quest of justice in addition to serving as a critique of patriarchy and militarization. Eventually, Kashmiri women's representations serve as a reminder that their struggle is about recovering control of their spaces as well as voices, not merely about survival. These writings transform our understanding of conflict, resistance, and the strength of human spirit by reclaiming control of their stories.

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