

# Breaking and Enduring Domestic Trauma and Maternal Resilience in Shahnaz Bashir's the Half Mother

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## Abstract

The *Half Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir depicts the harrowing experiences of Haleema, a Kashmiri woman whose life is shattered by the violence of the conflict in Kashmir. In this novel, Haleema suffers profound personal losses – the murder of her father by soldiers, the breakdown of her marriage, and, most devastatingly, the forced disappearance of her only son Imran. These traumas are rooted in the socio-political turmoil of Kashmir in the 1980s–90s, where security forces routinely abduct men with impunity. Haleema's journey illustrates both domestic trauma – the abuse and upheavals that occur within her family and home – and maternal resilience – her relentless struggle to find Imran and support other victimized families despite overwhelming odds. The conflict in Kashmir and the epidemic of enforced disappearances provide the backdrop to Haleema's story, imposing constant fear, uncertainty, and grief on her and countless others. Through close reading of the novel and secondary analyses, this paper examines how Haleema embodies the psychological toll of loss (nightmares, despair, hopelessness) and yet transforms personal agony into communal activism. Citing Bashir's text and critical studies, we show that Haleema's suffering becomes a collective testimony of resistance: her identity as a "half-mother" symbolizes all Kashmiri women torn by conflict. Ultimately, Bashir portrays maternal love as a source of unyielding strength. Haleema's resilience – her refusal to surrender hope or justice even as the trauma consumes her life – underscores the novel's critique of political oppression and affirms the courage of women living in Kashmir's long shadow of war.

**Keywords:** Domestic Trauma, Maternal Resilience, Enforced Disappearance, Collective Memory, Waiting as Resistance, Identity.

## Introduction

Haleema's life is defined by a series of domestic tragedies set against the Kashmir conflict. In her childhood, she loses her mother to illness and assumes her domestic duties, and then her father, AbJaan, is murdered by Indian soldiers in front of her eyes. The novel graphically depicts AbJaan's killing: "Three bullets were pumped into AbJaan – one in the neck, one in the heart, one in the stomach". This violent loss makes Haleema an orphan, depriving her not only of emotional support but also of the family's breadwinner. As Dar notes, Haleema "became an orphan when her father Ghulam Rasool Joo is killed by the military men in front of her". The trauma of witnessing her father's execution is deeply intimate and shatters Haleema's sense of security at home. Later her marriage to a medical assistant ends in divorce when she discovers his infidelity, further isolating her. This sequence of losses – mother, father, husband

– compounds Haleema’s domestic trauma: the violence of the conflict intrudes into her household, leaving her bereft and vulnerable.

These experiences leave Haleema psychologically scarred. In the aftermath of Imran’s disappearance, the novel shows her consumed by despair and self-hatred. Bashir writes that Haleema “woke up hating herself, remembering the pleasure of the dreamless sleep she had before dinner. She hated having to believe she existed...She wished she were dead”. This passage (from chapter 1) reveals her utter hopelessness: sleep – once a refuge – now brings dreams of her loss, and waking life feels unbearable. In her grief, even the daily ritual of prayer becomes hollow, as Haleema stares at the sky hoping for Imran but finding only “emptiness and [a] reminder of her loss”. Her eyes linger on the house gate long after her morning chores, yearning for her son’s return: “Her eyes did not leave her wooden gate”. These intimate moments of domestic life – doing chores, watching the gate, sleeping – are haunted by trauma. The novel links her inner world to everyday tasks; even the hens in the coop become a metaphor for her situation as “mother hens...angered from motherhood” that are helpless against the eagles that steal their chicks. Bashir’s imagery suggests that Haleema, like the mother hens, is trapped by forces beyond her control.

The household itself reflects the conflict’s intrusion. After AbJaan’s death, Haleema struggles to maintain the farm and animals, and she eventually falls ill. As Rana observes, Haleema “complained of breathlessness” and later “her cough was relentless”. Once a local healer in her village, Haleema’s declining health symbolizes the collapse of her community’s stability. The breakdown of Haleema’s family life – losing parents and husband – demonstrates a domestic dimension of trauma: violence at home, poverty, and loneliness. These personal calamities, while intimately private, are all consequences of the wider Kashmir strife. In each case, Bashir shows, political violence hits Haleema in her own home, turning her family into one of the innumerable casualties of military rule.

Despite the enormity of her suffering, Haleema embodies extraordinary maternal resilience. Her love for Imran becomes her sole driving force. From the moment Imran is seized by Major Kushwaha’s men, Haleema throws herself into a desperate search, devoting all her energy and resources to finding him. Ali and Meitei note that Haleema “stopped caring for herself” and “gave up both her physical and mental well-being to find him”. Every aspect of her life – health, safety, even hope of future happiness – is sacrificed to this one purpose. In *The Half Mother*, Haleema’s identity as mother supersedes all others. As the analysis explains, “Haleema’s love for her son forced her to sacrifice everything for the sake of her missing son”. In exile from normal life, she transforms her personal agony into a form of resistance. The more the army stonewalls her, the more determined she becomes.

Bashir repeatedly contrasts Haleema’s unbroken spirit with her poverty and powerlessness. There is a poignant scene where Haleema returns to find her beloved cows abandoned and hungry – she even notices “tears in the cow’s eyes” as they call for Imran – and declares “I am broke, I don’t have a penny now” (Bashir 109). Yet even penniless and alone, Haleema clings to a resilient hope. As the novel’s epigraph advises, “The greatest suffering brings the greatest hopes... and the greatest uncertainties lead to the greatest quest” (Bashir 3). Haleema repeats these words to herself to steel her resolve. In the face of “greatest miseries” she seeks “the greatest patience,” and she embarks on “the greatest quest” – the quest to reclaim her son. Throughout the novel, Bashir emphasizes that even the deepest suffering can give rise to the strongest aspirations.

Haleema’s resilience is not passive endurance but active struggle. She tours police stations and prisons across India, meets human rights commissions, and networks with other victims’ families. The narrative culminates in her co-founding an association of missing persons’ families. By the end, she is no longer

silent; she pleads with the newly appointed chief minister on behalf of all Kashmiris who have vanished. Her lonely vigil at the gate has given way to communal protest. As Ali and Meitei conclude, “Haleema continues her search and suffers physically and mentally... Yet her fight becomes a fight for justice for all”. In this way, maternal love fuels a collective resistance. Dar likewise observes that through Haleema’s persona, Bashir “tells the heartbreaking story of one woman’s battle for life, dignity, and justice”. Thus, the novel equates Haleema’s endurance with heroism: despite being “broken physically, mentally, and even financially,” she “continued her fight till her last breath”. Her unwavering spirit – her refusal to “turn away” from her pain – becomes a model of resilience for other Kashmiri women.

Haleema’s journey ultimately validates the symbolic title Half Mother. The term comes from the practice of labeling wives of disappeared men as “half-widows.” In Bashir’s narrative, Haleema adopts this label for herself after her son vanishes. As one scene dramatizes, when pressed on what to call mothers like her, Haleema defiantly asks, “So am I a half-mother?”. The question – uttered in stunned silence at a courtroom – articulates her newfound identity: not just a victim, but a public figure representing all who are “half” of something because of conflict. By the novel’s end she leads an organization of “half-mothers,” giving voice to all those who have loved ones stolen by the army. In taking the mantle of Half Mother, Haleema turns stigma into strength. She humanizes the statistics of loss: each missing child is not a number, but someone’s son or daughter, and Haleema’s half-status signals the injustice of that absence.

The personal tragedies in Haleema’s life are inseparable from the broader context of Kashmir’s political violence. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Indian military and paramilitary forces operated with virtual impunity under laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Thousands of civilians were detained, disappeared, or killed – often under the fiction of “encounter.” Analysts estimate that 8,000–10,000 people in Kashmir have gone missing since the late 1980s. Families like Haleema’s are left in a perpetual limbo: as one report notes, relatives of the disappeared remain “in a grueling state of uncertainty, where they can neither mourn nor live with any happiness”. The novel *The Half Mother* brings these grim facts into fiction. Bashir painstakingly recreates the mood of fear and despair that the disappeared cast across the Kashmir Valley.

Critics have observed that Bashir’s narrative “chronicles the pain and anguish undergone by Kashmiri women at the onslaught of military excesses and oppression”\*. Dar comments that women in Kashmir have “always been at the epicenter of military atrocity and violence”. Indeed, Haleema’s experiences – father shot as he plants a tree in his garden, son dragged from home in the middle of the night – exemplify the era’s brutality. At one point, when Haleema visits a court official to inquire about missing persons, she is told to pursue the army directly because “the only way to get any information about her son is to approach the army”. This bureaucratic coldness reflects the state’s indifference. Even high officials, like the chief minister Haleema confronts, can only rationalize the disappearances away by imagining Imran had crossed into Pakistan. Such dismissals betray how the conflict renders individual lives insignificant in political calculations.

*The Half Mother* also dramatizes the specific horror of enforced disappearance. Bashir illustrates the routine cruelty inflicted on prisoners: in the presence of Haleema, an elderly pathologist describes a boy’s body so mutilated that “the forensic report later said [his skin] was found under his nails”. Though not Haleema’s son, this gruesome anecdote confronts her (and the reader) with the ghastliness of torture centers. Throughout her quest, Haleema encounters other families of the missing. Each new acquaintance – like Rafiq, Shafiq and their ailing wife Shafiq – adds to the picture of communal trauma. Ali and Meitei explain that by the novel’s end, Haleema’s personal struggle has “become a fight for justice for all the

mothers and half-widows in Kashmir”. In this way, Bashir universalizes her pain. Haleema’s personal story of disappearance stands in for the thousands who have vanished. As another character, Izhar the journalist, vividly fantasizes in Bashir’s prose, he wants to “collect tears of the half mothers and sprinkle [them] on the faces of Indian journalists”, underscoring how the conflict’s victims feel utterly ignored.

The geographical and political setting reinforces the stakes. Natipora, Haleema’s village near Srinagar, is a microcosm of occupied Kashmir: army bunkers sprout in orchards, curfews shut down markets, and rumors of shelling circulate nightly. Haleema knows fear everywhere: children mimic the sound of bombs like fireworks, and adults live under inescapable military surveillance. Yet in the novel this environment also accentuates her courage. Bashir shows that the ordinary domestic space – Haleema’s courtyard, her kitchen, even her dilapidated bicycle – becomes a site of resistance. Taking her justice campaign to the streets, Haleema transforms haunted loneliness into purposeful activism.

The enforced disappearance of Imran exacts a devastating psychological toll on Haleema. The novel portrays her mind in torment: insomnia, hallucinations, and relentless anxiety. Bashir writes that after Imran vanishes “the memories of her son tore her apart every day and every night. She wondered if he was alive or dead, hungry or thirsty”. This acute longing shatters her sleep; she only dreams of Imran visiting, and “every time her determination to find her son increased”. In waking hours, her grief is constant and invasive. Rana describes how Haleema becomes consumed by a new identity of anguish. Isolated and abandoned, Haleema “stopped caring for herself”, giving up her health and sanity in single-minded pursuit of Imran. To Bashir, the question of Imran’s fate is an “eternal torture”: as Haleema notes, his disappearance kills the family “every day and resurrects [us] every morning to kill us again”. This metaphorical torture – the perpetual cycle of hope and despair – is arguably the worst cruelty of all.

Haleema’s psychological breakdown is also rendered in physical terms. Her inability to sleep or eat properly leads to weight loss and coughing fits. At one point she is seen “staggering... out of the doctor’s clinic”, breathless and coughing from panic. Even the simplest foods lose taste as she forgets salt in her cooking and sugar in her tea – a detail noted in a psychological study of trauma in the novel. These small symptoms mark her underlying Post-Traumatic Stress. Meanwhile, her hope for justice never fully vanishes, which causes a cruel expectancy: each phone call or message holds the potential (always dashed) of news. As Creative Saplings notes, she clings to scriptures and newspaper clippings in case they might contain clues, yet each dead end deepens her despair.

Social isolation compounds her mental pain. The community around Haleema shares her grief but is also afraid to speak openly. Soldiers patrol even women’s protests. Inside her own mind, Haleema often converses with imagined versions of Imran and her father – telling herself stories or pleading with God – which is both a solace and a reminder of absence. In one poignant image, when Haleema’s cows mourn her with tears, she pours out her heart to them, as though her only confidants are the creatures of her farm. Each contact with an authority figure – a police inspector, a lawyer, even a psychologist – ends in frustration, teaching Haleema to trust only herself. In Zamin Ali and Meitei’s analysis, this leads Haleema to “embrace the cause” of all families like hers, converting her private pain into public purpose.

The enduring sorrow in Haleema’s story mirrors that of real Kashmiri mothers. Academic commentators emphasize that women in conflict zones often feel “like half persons,” living with grief but no closure. Haleema’s transformation – from a grieving mother to an activist half-mother – dramatizes this phenomenon. In choosing to speak out, she both mourns Imran and refuses to let his disappearance remain invisible. Bashir thus grants Haleema agency even in trauma: her most private pain becomes a public voice. In the novel’s final scenes, the hope that had once been so fragile becomes a collective cry. As Neha

Rana observes, Haleema's struggle "mirrors the lives of many people from Kashmir". She no longer suffers alone. By the end, "Haleema becomes an inspiration for all the mothers and half-widows in Kashmir". The woman who once feared living now endures, determined that her story will at least bring recognition to their shared trauma.

To conclude, *The Half Mother*, Shahnaz Bashir uses the character of Haleema to illuminate how domestic trauma and maternal resilience unfold under the shadow of conflict. Haleema endures unimaginable personal losses – a murdered father, a failed marriage, and a kidnapped son – yet she continually summons strength from her maternal bond. Her experiences highlight the uniquely harsh plight of Kashmiri women whose families are torn apart by military rule. As analyses of the novel emphasize, Bashir deliberately frames Haleema's grief within Kashmir's history of enforced disappearances, turning her individual story into a collective testimony of suffering. The trauma she bears is both intimate and political: we see the battlefield in her home and the courtroom in her prayers. Yet through her, Bashir also dramatizes hope and solidarity. Haleema's unwavering determination – captured in her own words and in the novel's poignant epigraph – suggests that even "the greatest suffering" can give rise to "the greatest hope". By preserving Haleema's voice, *The Half Mother* insists that no mother's agony be forgotten. In the end, Haleema's journey from personal anguish to public advocate reveals the enduring power of maternal love as both a refuge and a form of resistance.

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