

## **Institutional Intersectionality: Violence against Kashmiri Women in ‘The Half Mother’**

### **Abstract**

*In the present world, identity and identity formation determines the representation and manners of interaction. Intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege. This research examines ways in which marginalization and state-sponsored violence against Kashmiri women results from intersectional identity. The phenomenon of Kashmiri women becoming ‘half widows’ and ‘half mothers’ as the consequence of intersecting variables has been explored in the context of Shahnaz Bashir’s novel The Half Mother (2014). The findings suggest the various facets of Kashmiri women’s identity which lead to her oppressed status. It gives a deep insight into the female sufferings in particular and miseries of Kashmir conflict victims in general, it also throws light on the ways these human sufferings get depicted in literature.*

**Key words:** *Intersectionality, Kashmiri women, Half widows, Half Mothers.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the constantly fluctuating world scenario, an individual human being is not acknowledged with a singular identity alone. The attitude, approach towards the world and behaviour of the individual is determined by the various disparate identities of that person. Not only is the person’s conduct determined by these identities but the way in which others treat the individual is also determined by these assorted identities. ‘Intersectionality’ is a term which caters to the consideration of these identities concurrently. The foundation of the concept of ‘Intersectionality’ has been credited to Crenshaw (1989), an African American lawyer working for the rights of the marginalized African American women and the multidimensionality of their experiences regarding their identities. Her argument revolves around the fact that the common procedure of the deconstruction of these identities and treating them in separate and exclusive classifications takes away the impacts which occur because of their simultaneous existence. When identity-driven categories like race, gender, class, power, and standing in the eyes of law are treated separately, they convey a completely different picture from the story which comes out when the identities are treated in an intersectional approach. The understanding and importance of this phenomenon therefore can only be treated in an Intersectional research (Walker, 2011, p. 15).

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This article explores the situation of Kashmiri women as affected by marginalization and state-sponsored violence. The phenomenon of Kashmiri women becoming 'half widows' and 'half mothers' as the consequence of intersecting variables has been explored. The study explores the intersectionality of Kashmiri women in Bashir's (2014) novel 'The Half Mother' which revolves around a woman whose son has been taken by the armed forces and she has no knowledge where he has been kept or even if he is alive. The article examines the novel in light of the Intersectional framework. Intersectionality facilitates in understating the ways in which gender intersects with other identities like race, colour, occupation, social standing, age etc. Intersection also becomes a tool to understand how various interactions contribute to the experiences of persecution and oppression. Keeping in mind the above ideas, this article analyses the oppression of Kashmiri women in the novel through the lens of intersectionality. The number of studies published on the atrocities and violence faced by the Kashmiri people is innumerable. Violence against women has also been the topic of many studies. Yet, the paradigm of looking at violence in the light of intersectional identities is different. The approach of mapping the multitude of factors responsible for specific atrocities committed against women is an addition to the understanding of the problem. Furthermore, doing so in the field of Kashmiri Fiction which relates the stories and narratives of the violated people is also unique in its approach.

### ***The Kashmir Conflict***

The present-day world is a global community and any action taking place in one part of the world has its reverberations throughout the globe. The major problem hindering the peace and prosperity of South Asia especially and the world in general is the conflict of the State of Jammu and Kashmir. It has been more than 70 years that Jammu and Kashmir has been the bone of contention between Pakistan and India. The armed conflict between the local population and the Indian Security Forces has created a war zone in the disputed territory (Altholz et al. 2015, p. 21). The existing conflict between the two nuclear powers of the region, is laying the foundation of the right to control the state of Kashmir. Although the conflict has been labelled and rendered as a territorial dispute, in reality, it has been termed by the Kashmiris themselves as the militarised control of the state (Mathur, 2014, p. 5). As a result of this war-zone like ground reality, numerous cases of cruelty and abuse have been documented. The abuse against the civilian population includes cases of extrajudicial killings, murders, disappearances, acts of genocide, rape, kidnappings and torture. In addition to the clear-cut violations of human rights and liberties, legal impunity has been provided to the perpetrators of these crimes i.e. the Indian Armed Forces (Mathur, 2014, p. 6). The documentation of these atrocities has not been at par with the tragedy. Thousands of unmarked and mass burials in graves and grounds have been unearthed by the people themselves. There has been no answer provided to them yet by the state or any other human rights

organisation. The consequential social and psychological impact has been great. The trauma and mass damage to the minds of the people has no bounds (Shah, 2012, p. 13).

### ***The Plight of Kashmiri Women***

A major concern, which has risen out of the occupation of Jammu and Kashmir by the military is the ensuing violence. Within this, the matter of disappearances of people dominates the scenario. It has been reported that more than 10,000 disappearances have happened (Dsouza, 2016, p. 27). The result of this loss envelops a multitude of consequences and affected individuals and families. The primary victim remains the person who has gone missing, but the loss transits in its manifold concentration to the families of the disappeared persons. The families continue living a life of despair, unaware of the reality and in a limbo where they do not know what has happened to their loved ones and in what condition they are living, if at all alive. The suffering of the 'left-behind' knows no limits (D'Souza, 2016, p. 78). Within the domain of the afflicted persons, the women who are members of the family left behind are the worst affected. The disappeared person leaves behind mothers, wives, and daughters. Not knowing the official status of their loved ones, not knowing if they are alive or dead, the term 'half-widow' has been coined for the wives left behind (Dsouza, 2016, p. 28). According to the Association of the Parents of the Disappeared (APDP) the number of Kashmiri women who have been officially deemed widows is around 20,000 and those who have no knowledge if their husbands are dead or alive, and are therefore called half-widows is numbered to be around 1,000 (Seema, 2009, p. 193). Closely allied with this is the concept of half mothers or mothers whose children have disappeared and they know not of their condition.

When taking into consideration the impact of these disappearances, they appear and seem to be in reality, more toiling and damaging. The wife and the mother are left in a constant state of hope combined with despair. The lingering hope of having the loved ones returned or giving up that hope and mourning them properly and continuing their lives as widows or mothers of dead children remains the paramount question in their minds. The 'waiting' is deemed more gruesome and painful than the acceptance of the grief (Dsouza, 2016, p. 28). The continuous lingering between the threshold of knowing yet not knowing, the challenge of waiting or continuing with their lives as mourners, takes away their basic human emotional connection of being allowed to live with the dignity of being widows or mothers of dead children. In addition to the disappearances, the heinous crime which is practised against Kashmiri women is the state-backed use of rape as a weapon against civilians (Seema, 2009, p. 184). One of the most famous and well-documented cases of army personnel committing this crime is the incident of Kunan and Poshpura villages in the Kupwara district. It has been reported that 23 to 100 women were raped and gang raped. Women from the age of 8 to 70, were forced and tortured to please the soldiers. Not only was the rape backed by the state, but also went unpunished. In addition, the influence of 'higher authorities'

and backing of ‘influential’ people, the case went unsolved because of the cited ‘lack of witness’ clause when the whole village was testimony to it (Altholz et al. 2015, p. 16).

Doctors without Borders stated in a 2005 report that the rate of sexual violence in Kashmir is one of the highest amongst the conflict-ridden regions of the world (Kanjwal, 2011, p. 57) and Kashmiri women have the hard luck of being the recipient of all types of violence and torture. They are simultaneous mourners for children, husband, parents, and siblings; at other times they are rape victims, victims of physical and psychological assault at the hands of the perpetrators of the crime and society in general. The hardest thing lies in the fact that the identity of the Kashmiri woman is superseded by her connection to her relations with the men in her life and her role in society. The victimization of the Kashmiri women lies on the centrality of their identities; being women, mothers, wives, Kashmiris and Muslim. This manifold aspect of their oppression can be properly examined only under the theory of Intersectionality.

### ***Intersectionality***

The concept of Intersectionality was influenced by the awareness raised during the literary movements of Critical Race Theory in the 1970s and the battle cries of the movement of Black Feminism; the major focus of which was the oppression of ‘black’ women and the concept of ‘racism’ and racial marginalization (Wallaschek, 2015, p. 223). Emerging from the U.S. Black feminism, Indigenous feminism, third world feminism, queer and postcolonial theory, the term intersectionality, was officially coined by Crenshaw in 1989 (Hankivsky et al. 2009, p. 3). The concept revolves around the belief that women are discriminated against on the basis of their gender. Yet this is not the only form of discrimination which they have to face. Accompanying this is the marginalisation on the basis of race, social and political class system, economic background and many more. Intersectionality points at this multifaceted form of marginalisation as the intersecting roles played by the various identities. Thus intersectionality is the sum total of all intersecting discrimination faced by someone.

The different forms of discrimination are regulated by various identities (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 1) since the question of identity is paramount in mapping women’s position in society. Race and skin colour, caste, age, ethnicity, language, ancestry, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic class, ability, culture, geographic location, and status as a migrant, indigenous person, refugee, internally displaced person, child, or a person living with HIV/AIDS, in a conflict zone or under foreign occupation, all of these combine to determine one’s social location and ultimately determine the identity formulation of the women and the resultant oppression or marginalization (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 198).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study formulated on the basis of close reading of the selected text. The close reading of the text leads to the investigation of the various incidents and events in the plot to analyse instances where various factors act in intersection to determine the oppressive state of the women in '*The Half Mother*'. In addition to the close reading technique, the influence of historical and socio-political factors is also deliberated upon, which results in the rise of persecution. The major theoretical framework which has been adapted is Crenshaw's (1994) approach towards intersection. The rationale for taking up Crenshaw's theory lies in the fact that Kashmiri Women are fighting their resistance movement on multiple levels. They do not face discrimination only on the basis of their gender or being part of a colonial empire. Their problems rise from the heart of the structure of the society and political milieu of Kashmir Valley. Their identity as women, being Muslims, Kashmiris and belonging to the lower class of society enhances their pathos. In light of all of this, the Intersectional theory is relevant and appropriate for analysis. Present day theories of intersectionality cater to the institutional and dominating structures of society. This also works to bring out into the open how the powerful systems of society, politics and history work together and shape the understandings and experiences of navigating the world (Martinez, 2017, p. 8).

In this study, the intersectional theory is used to decipher the intricacies of the various tyrannical and oppressive behaviours and situations, which the Kashmiri women are forced to live in, and adaptations are made specifically in the theory to study the historical and socio-political context of Kashmir and Kashmiri society to examine the text in detail. The study examines the intersecting factors as well as the impact of the resulting violence in the text. In order to analyse the intersectionality, the novel is analysed from the perspective of plot, setting, characters and events. An interpretative approach is utilised to analyse the text. The sample of the study '*The Half Mother*' by Bashir (2014) is the journey of the Kashmiri woman, Haleema, who sets out on the journey of finding her missing son and gets involved in a struggle that is much bigger than her own grief and pain. The constant excursions of looking for justice and facing multiple hurdles has been beautifully portrayed by Bashir.

## RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The Valley of Kashmir has been in a constant state of turmoil although before the 1980s a sense of peace pervaded amongst the people. After the dubious elections of 1983, the events took a turn for the worse and caused major changes in the once peaceful community. The backdrop of the novel, *The Half Mother* is set at the same time. The protagonist, Haleema is introduced in the opening of the novel as a woman going through serious misery and pain.

*She hated having to believe she existed, to feel she was conscious. She hated the smell that sleep brought. She wished she were dead. (p. 3)*

This is the dramatic opening of the novel that paves the way to the underlying misery and oppressive nature of tyranny which Haleema is going through. The starkness of her home, where she is forced to live alone and wait for the son who has been missing since the military took him away is detailed in a heart wrenching manner by Bashir (2014). In light of the famous ‘crossroad concept’ presented by Crenshaw, Bashir cites the example of ‘a woman of minority group’ navigating a crossing where she comes into the intersection of all biases standing against her (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 195) including patriarchy, race, colour, social status etc. Haleema here is depicted as a woman of a ‘minority group’. She is represented as a woman who faces horrors at the hands of the oppressing institutions. The oppressive institutions at work here, are delineated as the patriarchal society – ingraining her value in the concept of wife and motherhood, Indian Occupational forces – having killed her father and son, and the cultural norms which are forcing her to live a lonely life mourning her past alone. Her present condition, where she seems to hallucinate and talk to inanimate things is a result of all the pain she has gone through. Bashir (2014) carefully sets the stage of the underlying pathos and misery of the women who has had to suffer through the indiscernible pain of not knowing and waiting without any hope of a reprieve.

The plot progresses and we are transported through flashbacks to the time when Haleema lived a peaceful and contented life with her parents. The death of her mother was the first intrusion of lingering darkness in her existence. The story of her life with her father, her marriage and her consequential divorce are some substantial factors which determine the basis of the identity and personality traits which are specific to Haleema. With the birth of her son Imran, she gains the paramount identity of a mother and this holds the foundation of the plot and becomes the titular namesake of the novel. At times she is seen talking to vegetables calling them ‘*Dear collard green, apologies*’ or the cooking utensils ‘*Where have you disappeared? Where do I look for you now?*’ (p.4). This shows another important factor of intersectionality. The ‘systems of multiplicity’ and the inability to cut them in a clear-cut manner. Structural intersection encompasses the various ‘macro-level socio-political structures’ (Bailey, 2009, p. 17). Here these factors can be delineated as the oppressive regime, the occupational forces, colonial mindset and the patriarchal dependency of a woman. The problems which Haleema faces are not multiple but their impact is multi-faceted. The resultant trauma, PTSD, repetitions and other markers represent the impact of the structural intersection which Haleema is facing. Bashir carefully sets the stage of the underlying pathos and misery of the women through this haunting verses:

*The colour of everything is sorrow,  
The colour of moon is sorrow,*

...

*The colour of my heart, in its own heart, is sorrow.  
The colour of my breath is sorrow,  
The colour of sorrow is sorrow.  
(p. 5)*

Haleema murmurs these verses on and off absentmindedly contrasting it to the wedding songs she would have sung had her son been with her.

In another flashback we are taken to a time when Haleema is living with her son, and Bashir (2014) cleverly builds up the growing tension in the Valley with the various stages of Imran's development and ageing. As Imran is growing, the focus remains on him with Haleema assuming the identity of the homemaker and the thread which knits the family of three together and keeps it in working condition. The social and political conditions of the Valley start pervading the plot of the novel as Imran grows up and starts understanding the changes appearing in the Village of Natipora, their hometown. It is through Imran's eyes that the reader is made aware of the influences of the insurgent actors as well as the militarization of the village in particular, and the Valley in general. In one such instance, the insurgency of the army is seen increasing in the neighbourhood when they start building a bunker beside their home and Ab Jaan tries to reason with them not to do so, resulting in him being bashed and threatened with a gun. A young Imran is seen angry at this and bursts out '*How dare you touch my Ab Jann? How dare ... I'll kill you.*' (p. 27). The intersection of the political forces alongside the maternal role which Haleema is playing at this point in time is of paramount importance.

The concept of Political Intersectionality comes into play in this oppressive time in Haleema's life. Political Intersectionality is described by Crenshaw as the presence of a woman in a system of overlapping facets like the subordination constructions, anti-feminism and racism dominating structures (Bailey, 2009, p. 18). In the novel, we can observe these structures in the form of Indian Occupied Forces, Militancy, Anti-Feminist ideology run by the inherent patriarchal beliefs and the social standing of the protagonist. With the looming threat of a disaster, Haleema keeps the spirit of the family high and plays the important role of the uniting factor. The sudden shift in the family's life appears when a sudden crackdown by the military results in the killing of 'Ab Jaan'. He is shot point blank by the military for raising his voice against the inhuman treatment the army showed to the villagers. With this incident, Haleema turns from a contented daughter living peacefully in her home to an orphan who has no means of income or support. She has not only to support herself and her son but also keep herself safe from the advancing evils. The factors responsible for the emerging problems in her life are delineated here as the political turmoil of the State intersects with the new found responsibilities which Haleema has to fulfil and pave her way through them. This intersection is the depiction of the specific turmoil of institutional intersectionality of a Kashmiri woman.

It is not long after that that the pinnacle of despair descends on Haleema. Imran is taken by the military by force. They state no reason for it and drag Imran away from his home and his mother's embrace. At this important turnpoint, Haleema feels the height of helplessness and powerlessness. She is seen pleading with the military

*'You killed my father! Leave me someone to live with! How could you be so cruel'' (p. 56)*

Her pleas go unheard and it becomes visible that her being a mother or a woman is of no consequence to the blood-lusting army. Her identity as a woman who has no one to back her, a mother with no means of keeping her son safe, a Kashmiri in the midst of turmoil, a Muslim in the oppressive heat of unacceptability and belonging to a poor class having no means of bribing or raising resources to help out her son are delineated. These intersecting identities converge to increase and heighten the marginalisation and oppression which becomes the fate of Haleema. As quoted in Bailey's essay, Crenshaw describes this oppression as a 'dimension of intersectional disempowerment' where multiple political and social 'projects' work to increase the streamlining and subordination of the hegemonic entities (p. 18).

Part II of the book describes the constant struggle Haleema is going through. At first it is the struggle of raising voices to help her find her son. The results are unproductive. The various events which are detailed by Bashir in the progress of Haleema looking for help, point towards the intersection of institutional power structures and her conceived vulnerability as a woman of no means working in intersection to increase her misery. Intersectional theory clearly proposes the concept of those in power exploiting the weak on the basis of their identities and helplessness. It comes into play openly when we see the constable in the Police Station openly telling Halima *'It has been a long time since we filed an FIR. ... Actually, we cannot lodge an FIR against the Army.'* (p. 63). In addition to the powerlessness of state institutions like the Police, the so-called independent media also remains unable to help out Haleema. When she goes to the news agency to get her son's news reported they refer her to the Radio in an effort to resolve her problem. The Radio people also appear to be unable to run the news and they refer her to the TV station and from there to the newspaper. In short, the institutional and independent powers in Kashmir are all under the control of the Army and cannot do anything without their say so. The streamlining of Haleema's efforts can be seen under the lens of her being a 'cultural – outsider'. In addition to her being a woman – considered less than a man – she is also a Kashmiri Woman which multiplies her presence on the extreme margins, which is compounded by the patriarchal and colonial setup of the institutions in Occupied Kashmir resulting in further restrictions and marginalisation.



The journey of her search for her son takes her from one door and one office to another, at times she is seen pleading with the SSP while at others she is looking for Imran in the hospitals. She tries to attempt suicide by snatching the guard's gun. This also results in a complete lack of empathy and reaction. The guard becomes symbolic of the institution of Police when he seems to '*look vacantly*' and patronises her by snatching the weapon from her. The behaviour of the SSP is another example of how Haleema is treated as less than a citizen of the state or even a human being. The discrimination and derogatory attitude which Haleema has to go through at the hands of the Member of Parliament, Bhat is a clear example of how her being a young Kashmiri woman is working against her. At first, he listens to her tale of loss and gives her the hope of helping out. It is when she goes back to him week after week that he comes to his real reason of stringing her along for so many months and asks her,

*'Have you ever thought of yourself? ... You are wasting your beauty and time in vain.'* (p. 83)

Bhat propositions her to spend time with him and forget her son. The reason which he gives for this disgusting behaviour results from her defencelessness as a young woman with no supporter and protector. In the specific case of a woman who is already fighting on multiple levels with the hegemonic powers, her gender, religion and class are brought out in the forefront as the reasons for her ongoing oppression. The structural barriers result in further intersection of various 'group politics' which add to increasing the domination of a woman. Time passes and Haleema keeps searching for Imran despite her failing health. People tell her about various ways for finding her son. She is sent to search various army cantonments. She hears detainees who have been freed from the detention centres talking about a barber who might have some knowledge of the prisoners and she goes to meet him. The unfolding scene introduces another family deprived of bare human decency. The barber lives with his widowed daughter and her son. The daughter's husband had been cruelly killed by the army in a fake encounter leaving a pregnant wife and four sisters and parents, mourning for him. The girl who remains unnamed is an insight into the common and generalised pain which the Kashmiris are suffering. The barber relates his fate to Haleema describing his helplessness and lack of position in the eyes of the world:

*'My daughter is a widow now. ... Showkat was their sole son among four daughters, he was the only bread earner ... His father is old and senile ... Looking at their fate I called her home to ease them of some burden.'* (p. 98).

The pain and misery intensifies for the women who have to face countless problems because of the loss of their loved ones, primarily the male members of the family. They are left behind in the world, having no means of sustenance and society treating them as pariahs. The intersectional power play of the societal norms and values and the

institutional structure converging to outcast them is apparent. They have no place to call their own and no acceptance from the community at large. Another woman who is floating in the same boat of misery and helplessness as Haleema is Jana Akhtar. Her pain is intensified because of the circumstances. Her son had been freed from the detention centre in very poor condition. His health has depreciated and he is unable to carry his own weight. Yet, Jaan Akhtar is ecstatic and jubilant because she has found her missing son. But the happiness remains short-lived. The army plans a fake encounter; declares her son an insurgent and after killing him throws his body in the forest. The mother, who had gained happiness after finding the son back, is again pushed into the well of despair. The girl who is narrating the incident to Haleema terms the times to be the replication of *Karbala*. The factors which are a constant presence behind all these sufferings and misery are the intersection of the state-backed terrorism and the multifaceted identities of the women having to face it.

The ultimate result of this continued misery and oppressive environment is the resultant trauma. Haleema continues losing her health. She starts having hallucinations and is afraid of her lonesome existence. '*Her mind was full of noises and dark thoughts ... her mind was full of despair and frustration ... everything seemed frozen in time*' (p. 106,107). With time, the feelings of self-loathing and self-destruction start appearing. The continuous guilt which accompanies her because of her inability to save her son from being taken by the military escalates with the feelings of failure in finding her missing son. She states '*I am broke ... I wish to die but this hope pulls me back ... I don't know what will happen to me. I might faint and fall on a burning stove someday or I might not wake up one morning.*' (p. 109). She experiences feelings of self-loathing and self-destruction and recounts the suicidal tendencies which she keeps in check to keep the hope alive. These memories and flashbacks of the past are some of the impacts of the slow and gradual deterioration of her health and mental wear.

The novel closes with the death of Haleema who lived her life searching for her son. She is described '*She has become a pair of exhausted, languidly rolling eyes ...*' (p. 176). She moved from a happy homemaker to a human rights activist and the leader of the voice which was raised against oppression and violence faced by the Kashmiris in the Valley and outside. They were neither welcome nor accepted in mainland India which proudly declares Kashmir to be an inseparable part. The intersection of State sponsored violence, social values, historical context and multiple identities held by the Muslim Kashmiri women intensify and multiply the torment.

## CONCLUSION

Bashir's (2014) novel is an excellent example of institutional intersectionality leading to the oppressive attitude against the Kashmiris. The novel depicts the situation which the Kashmiris are facing; the international community claims to be working to alleviate this misery, yet they are unable to counter it at the ground level. The intersection of all

the institutional factors, religious discrimination, social and cultural norms, the political situation of the State, gender, class and racial discrimination: all work hand in hand to intensify the wretchedness faced by the Kashmiris. The women of Kashmir, who remain the target of every predicament, have to face the physical, psychological and social impact of these intersectional factors and thus become disadvantaged and destitute in every sense of the word.

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