

## Portrayal of Women's Struggle in Indian English Debut Fiction

Manjari jhunjunwala  
Associate Professor in English  
Vasanta College for Women,  
Rajghat, Varanasi  
Uttar Pradesh, India

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### ABSTRACT

The society, earnestly require policies and law to eliminate everyday torments and to ensure a safe world that promotes free movement of people in unrestricted manner in wider sphere, provide secure livelihood and access to all modern beneficial resources to them. Literature has witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages among others. Anita Nair too feels that nothing has changed in terms of mentality though women in fiction may have shrugged some of the sound jacketed representations. There are men as well who have recorded and acknowledged women's contributions to several movements and that a room of one's own benefits not only women but the literary tradition as a whole. In this context, I would like to bring out that the contemporary Indian fiction in English through local narratives in debuts that have focused perpetually on how women are working towards solidarity to establish a global women's movement that appeals for justice and peaceful survival of masses.

**KEY WORDS:** Local, mistrust, uncertainty, self-discovery, folk

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The contemporary writings unendingly have focused on how women have been through incessant strife and also how they pass through the tough circumstances leaving everybody contented. An Indian debutante author Shahnaz Bashir, a teacher of Creative Journalism, Narrative and Literary Reportage in the Central University of Kashmir, goes beyond the headlines for the other side of the Kashmir story-of mother's nightmarish quest for her missing son caught in uncertainty of life and death. Bashir's novel *The Half Mother* (2014) is based on Kashmir and its struggle, but what is unique is a woman fighting for her right-and emerges as fiction that transports the reader into emotional world of a mother, searching for her son-filled with loneliness and heartache, yet "the battered hope inside her was still alive". During Kashmir riots Haleema's father is shot dead in front of her. She frantically slaps her face and her chest and pulled her hair. Blood begins to gurgle out of Ab Jaan's throat and at this she faints. "Her tears had dried. The skin beneath her throat was red from chest thumping. Her cheeks had the imprint of her own slaps. Her hair fell loose over her face. She laughed and the abruptly ran towards the wall barefooted to bang her head. She rubbed her heels against the earth. Her shalwar slipped from under her feet." (p. 50) One day her house too is raided like others and her only source of life, her son Imran is detained by police as a suspect. Haleema grapples with them and is dragged by them along with her son but the Gypsy vanishes with Imran in the thick blanket of darkness. It was the longest night of Haleema's life and thus begins her dreadful struggle to find her son. She sells her cattle to Shafiq for ten thousand rupees, as well as her jewellery and more expensive copper utensils. She is mad about her son now:

She would slowly run her fingers over his scribbles and feels the letters, smelling the pages while riffling through them. Again and again, she had carefully ironed and folded his school uniform-the white shirt, grey pants and red sweater- and placed them in the trunk, along with his I-card, his stationary and the badge that said I love Kashmir. (69-70)

The present article would attempt to foreground and also endorse the fact that whenever a woman is in crisis, does not fail to exhibit her unbounded courage and unflinching determination to face it and care as well for her people and the whole world around her. Haleema goes to BBC and meets Izhar and tries to raise the problem of abduction of young boys and men in the name of *Azadi* of Kashmir. She meets the Imam and then she reaches the most horrible place in the 'earth's heaven' Papa 2. Named after a wireless language code, Papa 2 concealed the purpose of the place that was beautiful but horrible. "The gate of it was flanked by two watch posts. Relatives carried bags full of ironed clothes, clean underwear, toothpaste soap, shaving kits, flip-flops, handkerchiefs, medicines, radio sets, fruits, food and cartons of glucose" (86) Hours passed but Haleema is unable to go inside to see her son if he is actually there!

Hours passed; she waited and wriggled. She was feeling hungry, thirsty and suicidal. Yet each time it was the hope to see Imran that made her feel so. She saw crows and vultures hovering on the horizon over the ridges of Zabarwan. Endless coils of barbed wire topped the high walls around Papa 2. (87)

With times Haleema begins to forget details and she would remember them later, after finishing the narration. The only thing she cannot recall how many, how many people exactly, had she narrated the story to. Next morning she packs some food for Rehbar Khan, Jana's son who has been just released from Papa2 and is in hospital at Lal Chowk. 'They forced him to piss on red-hot heater. He has been passing blood in his urine since then'. Jana reveals the horrific truth to Haleema.

Haleema sobbed in her prostration. Her tears streamed down and fell on the rug. Suddenly her mind was full of despair and frustration. This is not going anywhere, she thought. She had put everything at stake, spent all her time searching for Imran. She had stalled everything. The Joo house had begun to collect dust and cobwebs. She had believed that she would clean it once Imran was home. But everything seemed frozen in time. (107)

Haleema is completely fallen into separation, mistrust, catastrophe, misfortune, tribulations and much more. With Izhar, the BBC person's help she travels to Central Jail of Srinagar as well. In a way this pain of waiting, this longing was like preparing for hope. She was oblivious to all the transitions in the valley and search for Imran was her only habit, a habit she can't do without and moreover she is never worried about being late to reach home as she is 'answerable to nobody and no one worried for her too.

Finally the Khizir the postmortem man gives Haleema the news of Imran's death, who he believes is tortured to death. "Suddenly the air she was breathing began to feel like cotton, choking her throat. Her mouth was agape and the silence around her turned into a loud whistle in her ears". (135-136) Haleema ultimately decides to file a case against the army as she learns that all the Kashmiris were going through the same ordeal as she was and together they form 'Association of Relatives of the Disappeared Persons' with Haleema their head.

Everyone turned to her. Silence. Advocate Farooq stopped writing and looked over his pince-nez. Whether their children were dead or alive or missing, mothers would remain mothers-but Advocate Farooq was not sure. He didn't know how to respond to Haleema. He couldn't be certain what status of victimhood should be attested to her.

'So am I a half-mother?' Haleema repeated. (143)

Here ends a woman's nightmarish quest for her missing son. The debut novel by Shahnaz Bashir has a unique strength in bringing to light one of the greatest tragedies of the concealed war in Kashmir. He also adds a fine distinction to the local narrative, caught in the uncertainty of life and death.

In this line Alka Joshi with her eloquent debut novel *The Henna Artist* (2020) adds one more plot to the story of women's struggle using local narratives. Alka Joshi was born in the state of Rajasthan and came to USA with her family at the age of nine. The Henna Artist is abundant in the protagonist Lakshmi's yearning for self-discovery with the need for a familial love. It is a prodigious glimpse into the Indian folk culture of the Desert state of India during 1950s. "Vivid and compelling in its portrait of one women's struggle for fulfillment in a society pivoting between traditional and the modern, *The Henna Artist* opens a door into a world that is at once lush and fascinating, stark and cruel." (dust jacket)

Alka Joshi herself discloses:

How would her mother's life have been different if she hadn't had an arranged marriage at 18? Joshi explains, "My mother was studying psychology at college in Agra. Her father called her back home to Rajasthan and said, 'It's time for you to get married. You're getting really spinsterish.' My mother comes into this room, she is introduced to my father, who is also young and didn't want to get married either. They both had hopes, things they wanted to accomplish in their lives, but their families had decreed, This is the time."

Within four years, Joshi's parents had three children; and five years later, the family moved from India to the United States so her father could pursue a doctorate. "My mother never had the decision-making powers, but she gave me so much latitude, so much freedom. I wanted to give her that gift back," Joshi says. "I can't change her life, but I can change it in fiction. I can create a character who leaves her marriage and goes off and finds herself and finds her destiny, and her financial and emotional independence. That's where '*The Henna Artist*' came from."

*The Henna Artist* chronicles the story of 17-year-old Lakshmi who deserts an abusive marriage to make her way to the vibrant city of Jaipur. Ten years ago she earned her living in Agra by making contraceptives teas for the courtesans to keep them childless and got good pay. Madams like Hazi and Nasreen were especially kind to her, offering her lodging in properties they owned and in their spare time, they taught Lakshmi art of henna. Set in the 1950s, Lakshmi becomes the most celebrated henna artist and trustworthy confidant to the wealthy women of the upper class.

Over time, my clients had come to believe that my henna could bring wayward husbands back to their beds or coax a baby from their wombs. Because of this, I could name a price ten times higher than the Shudra women. And receive it. Even Parvati credited her younger son's birth to my henna skills. (26)

Lakshmi's carefully crafted life is threatened when her estranged husband shows up at her door with Lakshmi's younger sister, Radha, whom she didn't know existed. How will Lakshmi protect the life of independence she's created in India, the same country torn in halves after the departure of the British?

By the time I met Samir in 1945, I had already created my own life of independence. I could pay for my lodging, eat well and send a little money home to my parents. What Samir did was offer me a chance to grow my business, and I grabbed it, the way a child grabs a firefly: snatch the air-quick! --before it disappears. (71)

She becomes the artist of the title, whose clientele eventually includes the wives, daughters and mothers of the high-caste rich and the powerful until the abandoned husband arrives in Jaipur, needing money and accompanied by Lakshmi's sister, of whose existence Lakshmi was unaware. Their presence threatens all the independence Lakshmi has accomplished for herself. There is more to Lakshmi's creativeness than 'painting' the hands and feet of her henna clients. She also provides herbal and medicinal sachets and potions to encourage, prevent or abort a pregnancy. She has learned all this naturopathy, all about medicinal teas, herbs and lotions from her mother-in-law before leaving the brutal son. Lakshmi may have grown to loathe her husband, but loves his mother, a blessing at a time and place when a woman doesn't just marry one man, but his entire family.

Therefore, when Radha appears on Lakshmi's doorstep, she becomes responsible for the girl.

Maa was pregnant when I left Hari? With another baby girl? And I hadn't even known? So many thoughts whirled around my brain. The expense of another dowry must have exasperated her! Like many poor women, my mother had felt burdened by girl children. (54)

The Henna Artist is a complicated novel about a complex society and it is a thrill to read even when Lakshmi is threatened with ruin. There are wonderful evocative phrases such as "gossip-eaters" for the women who spread rumours. It is always a treacherous journey, especially for women and girls. Joshi writes: "In India, individual shame did not exist. Humiliation spreads, as easily as oil on wax paper, to the entire family, even to distant cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews." (Calgary herald) In the beginning Radha obeyed Lakshmi and helped her in her henna business and trio enjoyed it much more. But more time Radha spent with Kanta, one of the high-profiled ladies and clients of Lakshmi, the haughtier she sounded as 'she was trying on city sophistication for size.' It was hard for Lakshmi to believe she was the same girl with the dusty petticoat, dirty nails and unkempt hair just three months ago. It bewildered her to see Radha growing so fast. To her horror she finds Radha pregnant and wants to keep her baby! Lakshmi feels herself responsible for all catastrophes:

I let myself slid down the wall. I pulled my knees to my chin, hugged them with my arms, rocked back and forth. I shut my eyes. I wailed. What a mess I'd made of my life, my parents' life, my sister's! If I hadn't been so selfish, this would not have happened. My sister would not have been sullied. My mother-in-law wouldn't have died without me to comfort her. My parents would not have been humiliated. (203)

I'd asked Malik to cancel our appointments for the day. I had nowhere I had to be. (230)

Lakshmi's ongoing relationship with Samir and her sister's affair with his son draw the wrath of Samir's wife, who starts a gossip campaign to drive the henna artist out of business. At the mountain retreat of Shimla, where Radha goes to deliver her child, both sisters find a fresh start. Radha allows Lakshmi's childless friend Kanta to adopt her baby while Lakshmi finds a new use for her skills as a healer at the Western hospital in town.

It was true that the patients at the clinic had been relieved to learn they would not have to take foul-smelling medicines. The pregnant woman had touched my wrist as a gesture of thanks before leaving. Counting the time with my *saas*, I had fifteen years of knowledge about herbs and natural substance that I'd refined and improved upon. (294)

A thousand miles from the tiny village where I's started, I was finally home. (342)

Lakshmi is the helpless victim of her sex, cast, and economic status, and yet rises above her poor start in life to overcome the obstacles she has faced. All of it is true. The book paints an intimate and unflattering picture of India's social, economic, and gender inequality. How difficult it is to be a poor woman or a woman at all.

Both Haleema and Lakshmi are portrayal of women of struggle, women in struggle, who have contributed not only to the wider arena of local problems, but in particular have pioneered the establishment of women's organisations thus opening up paths of female resistance and efforts throughout the 21st century.

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