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An Ecofeminist study of Red Maize by Danesh Rana and The Half Mother by Shehnaz Bashir

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Abstract:

Western paradigm is always shaped by an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework whose purpose is to maintain, justify and explain the relationship of domination and submission in general and men's domination of nature and women in particular. Ecofeminism looks into this framework of domination and subordination and sees an inherent relationship between woman and nature thereby seeing a domination of nature and exploitation of women. This paper would look into how the Kashmir conflict has been destroying nature and the impact of conflict in subordinating the women. The paper would undertake the studies of the novel *Red Maize* by Danesh Rana and *The Half mother* by Shahnaz Bashir.

Keywords: women, nature, ecofeminism, Danesh Rana, Shahnaz Bashir, domination and subordination.

Discussion:

The term ecofeminism was first coined by French feminist, Françoise D Eaubonne in 1974. It gained prominence in academic circles as well as social circles equally due to ecological crisis and prevalent patriarchal attitude. Ecofeminism started as a reaction against men's overexploitation of nature and the resultant effect of this degraded nature on humans, specifically women and children. It is also known as the 3rd wave of feminism and is an academic movement that explores the connection between nature and women. It also looks into the subordination of nature, women and non-human world by patriarchal organizations. There are certain key features of this domination, which includes;

- a. Hierarchical thinking: also known as up and down thinking which values anything that is on the upper rung of the ladder more than the one that is down.

- b. Value dualism: where there are two oppositional pairs of contrasting views that give higher value to one over the other.
- c. Logic of domination: it justifies domination.

The western thoughts are deeply embedded in the duality which would always see nature as inert, rugged and wild that has to be tamed. It also gives primacy to utilitarianism and dry logic driven by mechanistic attitude rather than this emotional and humane attitude. The western thought is more focused upon division rather than unity as instead of focusing upon the interconnection each element shares, it seems more interested in promulgating oppositional characteristics. Therefore, the attitude that is borne out of this patriarchal hierarchy contends: All that is feminine needs to be controlled. Ecofeminism originated out of this patronizing attitude and imbalance in power relations. Ecofeminism emerges from this ignoble attitude that shallow understanding of the environment would not help in solving the problems hovering over the environment.

It envisages that there is much more to nature than the aesthetic beauty and preservation of it needs genuine and diligently measured actions on part of human beings. According to Patrick White, "To be a feminist, one must also be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere in which human beings participate or perish" (48).

It aims at dismantling the structure that prioritizes one and marginalizes another, for example, it gives primacy to male in male-female dynamics, to culture in culture/nature, to reason in reason/emotion, to white in

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white/black and to human in human/animal. “—Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families and the common unities. These struggles are waged against the maldevelopment and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations and global capitalism. They are waged for environmental balance, hierarchical and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous culture and economic value and programs based on subsistence and sustainability” (Gaard, “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism” 2)

Ecofeminism is not a unifying experienced theory rather it varies from culture to culture and has different locus standi which is quite contextual .Although ecofeminism incorporated plethora of strands within but if we could boil it down then the basic tenet it espouses is that the western discourse normalises the exploitation of nature. It looks into the historical paradigm and reevaluates the nuances of approaches which led to the exploitation of women and nature.

The unending Kashmir conflict has resulted in tales of myriad emotions: PTSD, depression, anxiety and many more. There are hundreds and thousands of killings, hundreds of disappearances, people are maimed and brutally tortured. There is bloodshed on massive scales. The conflict exacerbates when it seems it is going to end soon. Cross firing, curfews and repeated internet blockades have made the lives of citizens very hard. This took a heavy toll on the public, generally and on the lives of women living under this particularly. Women are not even active partners to the conflict yet they have been subjected to molestation, abuse and sometimes even jailed. They are subjected to extreme anxiety, depression, miscarriage, abortion, etc. These are very common among the women of Kashmir. Women have been facing the pain of trauma and patriarchal culture for too long now. A mother wails for her dead son somewhere, a sister silently sobs for her dead brother , a brother bears the pain silently of his dead brother echoes and finds its place in Kashmiri literature. Just to find the traces of their husbands or their disappeared sons they run pillars to post also they have to carry the burden of honour and the dignity of the patriarchal society.

“ women have never been secure within or without the nation state - they are always disproportionately affected by war, forced migration, famine and other form

of social, political and economic turmoil” (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes” 514).

Tale of almost every Kashmiri woman reeks of sheer sadness and excruciating pain. Their whole existence has been reduced to halves by coercion since the onset of militancy in the valley. There are half-mothers, half-widows and half-sisters pining to know about their dubiously disappeared kiths and kins. Their mental health is in tatters leaving aside the social and economic aspects. What is more horrible are the abrasions they have to bear from both the sides; from armed forces deployed to protect them as well as from the terrorists. It is very ironical that paradise seethes of wailing women flanked between armed forces and terrorists. For them, it is a well ahead and an abyss behind. No doubt, the oppression faced by women in conflict riddled areas is apparent but its ramifications are nuanced percolating down to other generations as well as to nature. The afflictions faced by women in these areas are diverse and multi-faceted; they are tortured personally as well as publicly. They have to bear the brunt of tragic trials and tribulations ensued by armed forces. *The Half Mother* is one such narrative by Shahnaz Bashir recounting the struggles of a mother in the conflict torn region of Kashmir. He is a Kashmir based writer, born and bred in Kashmir. His fiction is embedded with stories narrating his lived experience which makes his writing speak well to the sensibilities of people living under the shadow of conflict. *The Half Mother* bears testimony to the pain and trauma of Kashmiri women reflecting upon their strength and resilience in the face of turmoil. This polemical novel revolves around a female protagonist Haleema who is a titular half mother. She is the one reflecting pain and agony faced by all vulnerable women in the valley. Ab Jaan, her father took great care of her after her mother died during her childhood. She left school early in order to help Ab Jaan. In her twenties, she married a man of her choice only to realize later that he betrayed her. She divorced her husband after three months of marriage and later got to know of her pregnancy. She gave birth to a boy and named him Imran never thinking of bad premonitions lying ahead. During the 1990s when the insurgency began, bunkers became a common sight troubling the normal life of villagers. When armed forces started digging a bunker a few meters away from Ab Jaan’s plum orchard, he contends, “The bunker will be a nuisance- you will always be intruding into our homes. Our women cannot come out of their houses. Please take the bunker a little away from here” (Bashir, “The Half

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Mother” 26). This was the time when curfews, crackdowns, raids and killings started hovering over normal lives and the most susceptible to this torment were women and nature. “Shafiqa’s daughter Rukhsana became the first woman from the neighbourhood to be beaten, in her own compound. Her parents were tied with ropes and made to see their daughter being stripped by a trooper. And then farmer Ramzaan Dar’s ripe paddy was set on fire when he refused to hand over his son Riyaz to the army” (Bashir, “The Half Mother” 32). The effect of militarism is such that to run errands related to household chores become a task. The novel majorly concerns Haleema’s son Imran who gets arrested by army without any claimed crime leading to his disappearance. After Ab Jaan’s brutal death, Haleema and Imran relied upon each other for support until Imran’s enforced disappearance. Haleema was left alone to mourn. Her whole life became a search for her lost son. “She sold her cattle to Shafiqa for ten thousand rupees, as well as her jewellery and more expensive copper utensils. The Joo house wore an empty look now...She began talking to herself or to the walls. Sometimes she would talk to the things that belonged to Imran, crying and wailing alternately” (Bashir, “The Half Mother” 69). Her loss and pain kept multiplying intensely after she lost Imran who was the only hope she had after Ab Jaan’s death. Women are soft targets in the region of turmoil. Caught in the labyrinth of conflicting emotions-divorced by her husband, forced to go back to her father’s house with her only son, Imran, her story is a tale of pathos and loss since the very beginning. Women in conflict zone undergo traumas by witnessing the death and torture of their male counterparts. Haleema’s father is brutally killed in front of her eyes by an army major for mustering the courage to question him. Her son is taken into the custody for being the namesake of JKLF commander and later disappears which compels Haleema to run from pillar to post- from jails to detention centers to police stations. Haleema’s tale is the prototype of what most of the females go through in the conflict torn regions of Kashmir. The travails these women go through on a daily basis bears testimony to the mental tumult, agony and unending sufferings of the subjects especially women. Their life oscillates between fear and hope – fear of the death of their kins who often disappear during search operations and hope for their safe return. Haleema’s tale transcends the subjectivity and becomes the tale of the general population. Thus, to avoid such viciousness on women, the bodies of women have prevented women from

being at the forefront of the resistance movement, keeping the resistance movement as purely masculine.

“She had become a metaphor for Kashmir- the coveted value of the conflict. She was in a battle between the mujahideen and soldiers. She was being wooed and humiliated at the same time...She was the victim and aggressor, terrorist and soldier, jannat and jahannum, Firdous and Shakeel” (Rana, “Red Maize” 243) These inklings from the novel reflect how women from conflict riddled regions of Jammu and Kashmir face torments being sandwiched between armed forces and mujahids. These words further reverberate the agony and anguish of women in the face of conflict and military oppression.

Red Maize is one of the important literary narratives to come out of this region in recent years and that too by someone who has first-hand experience of the conflict. Women in Kashmir have been at the receiving end since the onslaught of militancy in the 1980s and this novel explicitly sheds light upon the ironical state of Kashmiri women. They are the most vulnerable and suffer a great deal in the hands of oppressive androcentric systems. Their suffering is multidimensional, affecting them psychologically, socially, physically, and economically. Women are exploited, abused and raped. This paper attempts to argue, in the light of Danesh Rana’s novel, how the conflict affects women. The prime focus of the novel is Kausar Jan, a widow and a mother to three sons. She embarks upon the excruciating journey when her second son Shakeel becomes the first from Morha Madana to be the area commander of a terrorist outfit. Kausar Jan, who lived a very simple life, never imagined this evil event in her wildest dream. During childhood, when her eldest son Khalid innocently announced, ‘I want to become a mujahid ’ (Rana, “Red Maize”, 13), the very next day she visited Ziyarat along with her sons to ask for forgiveness. During the 1990s, when conflict erupted in the valley; brothers, husbands and sons who became mujahids and started fighting for azadi left women alone and pondering. The trail of interrogation which began after Shakeel became a mujahid left their whole family devastated. Kausar Jan, standing firmly in all the storms earlier, started drooping after this event. She was unaware of the impending doom awaiting her in near future; from being a mother to three sons to being no mother at all. Her eldest son Khalid becomes a pawn in the hands of military personnel when Shakeel visits home for the first time after becoming a terrorist. Then starts the vicious cycle of

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interrogations which led to Khalid's disappearance making Kausar Jan, a half-mother. The novelist here in the midst of the novel dedicates a whole chapter to the horrendous tales narrated by half –mothers, mothers who are unaware of the fact that their children are dead or alive. "Kausar Jan stays for two weeks in Doda in a dilapidated dormitory meant for destitute women. Here she finds solace in the company of other women, who are also searching for their missing sons, brothers and husbands. Seduced by the call of jihad, many of these men have enrolled in the tanzem. Some were attracted by the power of the gun and others were intoxicated by the ideological banter and the debt they owed their religion. Many others were forcibly picked up at gunpoint" (Rana, "Red Maize" 105). Despite the hopeless sojourn with other mothers, Kausar Jan keeps searching for Khalid relentlessly but in vain. Khalid returns but never returns again. The atrocious loop of upending inquiries by the military forced him to choose the path he once repudiated. The terrifying cross-examinations by military personnel compelled him to become a mujahid. This seems to be a very sorry state of affairs when it comes to Kausar Jan because she is being oppressed explicitly as well as implicitly. Shakeel becomes a mujahid considering it as his duty, Khalid is forced to become a mujahid and Firdous, her youngest son becomes an SPO in a special task force. He is trapped and killed in a fake encounter by police personnels leaving Kausar Jan alone to face the macabre dance of death of her three children. This is very ironic that men whether in armed forces or in terrorist outfits are trained to deride and distance themselves from their feminine side, their tender or emotional side while females are expected to produce brave men/soldiers themselves being submissive and unquestioning. The psychological burden to earn makes men leave their houses no matter the means of earning whereas women of the house are left alone to cater the economical, social and psychological needs of their children. It is a plain simple observation that women in conflict areas suffer apparently more than the male members of their family. The mental and physical exertion faced by them percolates down to their children and their children's children.

Gul Mohammed, the village headman who acts as a messenger both for army and militants also harassed Kausar Jan as a young widow. Later in the novel, his elder daughter Hasina "unfortunately caught the prurient eye of a mujahid," and this event left an indelible mark upon her psyche. "Her soul became subservient to her body. Each

time there was a knock on the door, she would start to shiver and look for the place to hide." Her younger sister Fozia, a 14 year old blooming child is raped by Rehmatullah Peer, self proclaimed godman and area commander of the tanzem . The same night she gets killed in an encounter. Hasina commits to avenge her sister's death by becoming Nilofer's (Shakeel's wife) friend. She passes every bit of information to the army leading to Shakeel's death, thus leaving pregnant Nilofer alone to survive the traumatizing conflict. The novelist ends the novel optimistically saying that, "One day when Kausar Jan is very old, with wrinkled skin and white hair, she might welcome her grandson to her home. She might let him smack the bundles of maize with his cricket bat" (Rana, "Red Maize" 269)

Livestock being one of the prominent sources of income in the valley also suffers inimitably during conflict which is referred to, in the novel. Shakeel's entrance to tanzem is celebrated by butchering his own goat. "Shakeel stood stunned, looking at the pool of blood reddening the grass. When he returned home, he told his mother that the goat had strayed and was probably dragged away by some wild animal" (Rana, "Red Maize" 46). Animals being innocent are killed mercilessly during the combat between militants and armed forces. There is an atrocious incident narrated by the author depicting the unequal horrors of conflict torturing animals. "In the cowshed a buffalo lay dead. Through the ruptured flesh of the animal, its innards spilled out to form stinking lumps of mangled flesh and cracked bones. A few metres away from the dead buffalo, some parts of a dead man created a nauseating sight. A damaged Kalashnikov by his side looked as if it had been melted in a hot furnace" (Rana, "Red Maize" 235). Nothing depicts the agony of evil human productions as vivid as this scene.

CONFLICT AND NATURE:

The attitude rendering nature without any humanity is deeply ingrained in western as well as eastern thoughts, beliefs and attitudes. This attitude leads to the subordination of nature. This is true to the landscape of Kashmir where this attitude amalgamating conflict totally ravaged nature. The conflict couldn't spare the fragile natural environment. An agency named Andlou spoke with the experts to understand how armed conflict is costing the environment with unbearable consequences. "Wherever there is anthropogenic activities , it is definitely

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going to cost the environment” Mohsin Bhatt, an environmental activist said in contexts of environmental degradation in Kashmir. Jennifer Crook in a research paper titled *War In Kashmir and its effect on the Environment* wrote that deployment of thousands and lakhs of troops by India and Pakistan in Kashmir in 1947 led to poaching of free species such as ibex , blue sheep and urian.

At first the animals were killed for food later for profit since the value of these animals in the international market was quite high. Consequently, some of the species went extinct while the others like snow leopard and Himalayan Marmot were pushed to the verge of extinction. Not only did it impacted humans but also endangered flora and fauna of the area. While giving references to Tosamaidan meadows which sometimes back were used as an artillery firing range by the Indian army, an environmental activist Raja Muzaffer Bhat told Anadolu agency that many unexploded shells are lying in the meadows reveals an RTI.

In 2017 a court directed to give compensation to the victims while also calling for the measure to tackle environment degradation in the area. But Tosamaidan Bachov Front, an organisation working for the betterment of the meadows alleged that the government and the local admin did very little to save the lush green meadows. Kashmir has been home to 120-150 glaciers but due to human interference and tensions, they are receding at a faster rate. D.H Eddie in 2002 said in a study titled “the military impact on environment “that environmental stress is a cause and effect of political tension and military conflict between India and Pakistan "If this conflict continues these resources become scarcer,” "The more human interference around these natural resources, the more environmental problems will arise.” D. H Eddie.

“Another study, Linking the recent glacier retreat and depleting stream flow patterns with land system changes in Kashmir Himalaya, India, published in the journal *Water* by Irfan Rashid, Ulfat Majeed, Sheikh Aneaus and Mauri Pelto assessed the changes in Kashmir's largest glacier, the Kolahoi Glacier, between 1962 and 2018, and found that the glacier is receding at a very fast pace. It has lost almost 23 percent of its area since 1962 and has fragmented into smaller parts," it said. Due to human's interference , the glaciers in Kashmir are reducing. Huge military buildup near the ecological sensitive zones lead to the human and animal conflict

which results in fleeing of certain species. There can be no doubt that the detailed work summarises the scathing characterisation of how women as a whole are subjected to varied maltreatments in the society keeping in mind the factor of nature as well. It unfolds how the relationship between women and the environment are criticised and the effects are drastic. The final message even reflects on the various works of literature that show the passive attitude towards the very subject. This examines how the conflicts raise central issues towards ecofeminism. It evidently shows how the patriarchal society plays a dominating role and has resulted in the suppression of women and nature and their living. The ignorant nature of our larger society is embedded through this, ruthlessly and even evokes how this conflict hits the household and even outside. The societal stratification has witnessed enough; both nature and women in Kashmir have gone through the diabolical pangs in decades. The close knit connection woven between nature and women fabricates a universe where dogmas reign and voices are muted. The brutal conflict and violence linger through rugged houses and lanes and is addressed the least. The struggle lens how myopic visions keep them marginalized and the common struggle through nature surfaces. Human rights are questioned and hence the violence that exists should be controlled in the context of a better future.

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