

## Precarity of Self: Identifying the Liminal Borders of Self in Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*

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### Abstract

This research paper explores the liminal state of existence and self-identity of ordinary people in the militarised state of Kashmir. In doing so, it aims to conceptually examine the precarity of self and the sequential element, vulnerability in Shahnaz Bashir's novel, *The Half Mother*. The insurgency and violence of 1990s caused by the political and religious disputes necessitated militarisation in the territory. Violence and conflicts further emerged in the process of imposing law and order by troops in the forms of abduction and investigation of civilians on the pretext of suspicion stimulated the precarity of existence and identity of ordinary Kashmiris. In the case of Bashir's novel, it narrates the uncertainty of existence, self and psyche of the protagonist Haleema, whose son goes missing in the militarised region giving her an indefinite status, 'Half Mother'. The state of precarity discusses the sense of diffused identity and the vulnerability experienced by the victims of violence. Hence, this article employs Judith Butler's concept of precarity explained in *Precarious Lives* to construe the state of vulnerability and the effectuated dehumanisation due to precarity of self through Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*. Further, the paper also identifies the liminal state of the protagonist from the stages of self and existence questioning the human rights violations of the perpetrators.

**Keywords:** Kashmir conflict, precarity, self, vulnerability, human rights.

### Introduction

Borderlands and borderland communities remain prone to invasion, surveillance, and control. This scenario provides unrestricted authority to the nation state for the establishment of new political, social, and cultural entities. Borderland communities are exposed to frequent transitions due to foreign interventions contributing to the prevalence of state of liminality concerning the identity of the inhabitants with respect

to place, culture, and society. In addition to the heterogenous perspectives on identity, borderland is also considered as a liminal space for its geographical positioning. Borderland characterises a division between two geographical land masses, whereas the borderland communities are exposed to multiple cultures and societies representing the impossible situation of the population to monopolise their regional identity between the invisible borders. Borderland communities represent the state of liminality as remarked by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as

I now call it *Nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space where you are not this or that but where you are changing. You haven't got into the new identity yet and haven't left the old identity behind either – you are in a kind of transition. (as cited in Scott and Tuana 1)

Gloria Anzaldúa's *nepantla* and precarity are similar ideas that demonstrate the aspects of uncertainty in existence. Precarity manifests existential problem, problem of reproduction of life and vulnerability. Precariousness of existence is observed through the establishments of unreliable infrastructures of continuity and insecurity of social positioning. Normalcy in life becomes the problem of reproduction of life which is affected by the uncertainty of temporality. The combination of uncertainty in existence and temporality precipitates vulnerability which further induces precarization. Though the actuality of self-precarization is prevalent, precarity in society "as a category of order that denotes social positioning of insecurity and hierarchization, which accompanies processes of Othering", (Puar 165) indicates the external imposition of precariousness.

Oriental notions emphasize the precariousness of the other being imposed by the face on the pretext of an inaccurate conception of moral binding of the other. Those moral images constructed by the face manifest the emergence of othering. Butler comments on the disagreement of the process of othering as "this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. . . it tends to ruin my plans" (Butler 130). The othering and the faulty stereotypical image form an important place in the social positioning which determines precariousness. Precarity is plausibly discussed with aspects like place, culture, society, and self. Precarity of self focuses on the mental precarity defining the inner turmoil of identifying self. In *Borderlands*, where precarity is an innate characteristic, identifying self in a multicultural community is intricate. Researchers have discussed the in-between-ness experienced by the borderland communities through the concepts of *nepantla* and precarity to elucidate the intricacy in establishing normal livelihood.

The subject of the research paper focuses on the precarity experienced by the people of Kashmir. The region of Kashmir, often described as the crown of India, is surrounded by Pakistan, Afghanistan and China precipitating geopolitical conflicts over the border state. The state is considered to be the 'unfinished agenda of colonisation'

referring to the unsettled demarcation of Indo-Pakistan border of Kashmir which is a repercussion of partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. The basic infrastructure of Kashmir's geography and history clearly exhibit the prevailing precarity in the region. Besides the disruption caused by the division of political boundaries, the impact of it is also reflected in the division of religious and cultural ideologies among the populace. Due to social unrest in Kashmir, the state authorised military activities maintain absolute control over the region ignoring the moral ethical relations of Kashmiris. Women victims of heightened militarisation face the liminality of the existence by encountering sexual exploitation, and uncertainty of familial relations, i.e., Half mother and Half widows. Here the word 'half' is a connotation for the unsettled status of personal identity which indicates the possibility for both, being one and not. In Kashmir, women, who have lost the men in their family to the insurgency and unsure of their existence are called with the word 'half', as an adjective to their familial status in a way of denoting the probability of the return or forever disappearance of the member. The life of ambiguity experienced by half mothers and half widows induces the psychological instability due to the missing of their loved ones. The prevailing precarity of Kashmir acts as hindrance for the construction of stable identity which also exemplifies the mental borders of in-betweenness experienced by the women. Further, discussions on the social trauma, sense of incompleteness and stigmatisation of half widows and half mothers often fails to probe into the perspectives of precarity, an aspect that forms the primary condition for development of the mentioned problems. This way, the article attempts to understand how precariousness influences the psychological and existential concerns of Kashmiris. This research paper employs the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's precarity in *Precarious Lives* to discern the liminality of existence and identity which perpetuate the effectuated vulnerability and dehumanisation of the people of Kashmir, especially, half mothers and half widows of Kashmir through a textual interpretation of Shanaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*. The novel portrays the women of Kashmir as indirect victims of war by documenting the sufferings of a half mother, Haleema, who awaits the return of her son, a victim of enforced disappearance during the conflict.

### **Precarity of Self**

Judith Butler describes the state of an individual, who experiences precariousness in life due to influences of the 'face', in the form of conceptions and opinions over the 'Others'. Here, the face represents the figure that communicates precariousness to the Other which adopts non-violence to annul human life. The false obligations about the Other, which are mostly external and away from them are addressed by the face against the will of the Others which misleads the notions about their existence developing a precarious life. Butler in her book *Precarious Lives*, addresses the failure of the face in addressing the notions of others as "[t]he structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (Butler 130). Uncertainty of choices due to morality and ethics,

expose the individual to vulnerability and their liminal state of existence. According to Emmanuel Levinas, “My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world . . . To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question” (Levinas 24). The obligation addressed against the interests of the individual and the ethical relation to the self provides the space for precarity. The precariousness of unidentified self and meaning further develops into vulnerability and uncertainty of existence. Pertaining to the Kashmir context, the familial relations of the victims of violence imposed by militarisation are exposed to precariousness in the form of meaningless existence and fractured identity implying to the status of their relationship with the victims. For instance, women as the familial relations of the missing victims of enforced disappearance are addressed with uncertainty as ‘Half Widow’ and ‘Half Mother’. The protesters against the military deployment are arrested as militants and in certain cases, on the pretext of suspicion, they are abducted forcefully by the security forces. The wives and mothers of those informers and innocent victims of suspicion, women who are oblivious of the existence of their loved ones, survive the state of limbo by facing harassment and discrimination socially, economically, physically, and psychologically. Legally, the women are unable to claim their male family members to be alive or dead. The paradoxical state of existence of women in Kashmir exposes the individuals to the contradictions of the consequences of war, humanisation, and dehumanisation. Butler exposes the conditions for precarious lives of the Others caused by the acts of dehumanisation influenced by the face, here it is the state sponsored organisations of security forces against the native populace. The half widows and half mothers represent the Others in experiencing precarious lives due to the categorisation of the population as supporters of militancy by the face and Butler opines the exposure of the vulnerable populace to dehumanisation as

those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. . . there is the use of the face, within the media, in order to effect a dehumanization. It would seem that personification does not always humanize. For Levinas, it may well evacuate the face that does humanize; and I hope to show, personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization (Butler 141).

Though the intention of the security forces is to protect the civilians of Kashmir, the suspicion built over misconceptions of the people of Kashmir results in the imposition of violence which illustrates the personification of dehumanisation. The charges against the civilians as state informers and militants personify the failure of representation which prevails the precarious state of existence of the others imposed by the face.

The images constructed by the security forces on the suspected population with respect to the border security communicates precariousness to the people of Kashmir determining their identity. Haleema, the protagonist of *The Half Mother*, a single mother was supported by her father, Ghulam Rasool Joo and her son, Imran Joo economically,



physically, and emotionally. After the death of her *Ab Jaan*, Haleema lost one of her supporters which was followed by another tragic event – the abduction of her son, Imran Joo who was mistakenly arrested for another neighbourhood militant named Imran Bhat. The unauthorised abduction of Imran subjected Haleema to experience incessant facets of uncertainty. In order to bring back her son and to find clues about his existence, Haleema plunges herself into various stages of uncertainty. In this case, women experiencing similar scenario are given social titles as ‘Half Mother’ and ‘Half Widows’. The voiceless women of Kashmir, who exist without any legal assurance lead a precarious life, which illustrates the notion of Butler on how precarity becomes an identity: “The one with whom I identify is not me, and that ‘not being me’ is the condition of the identification” (Butler 145). Haleema throughout the novel identifies herself as Half Mother – the mother in search of her missing son victimised by the security forces. Women with the status of Half Mother or Half Widow confront social exclusion and the state of liminality in terms of identity and existence which are affected by the social, psychological, and economic interventions. Thereby, the experiences of Haleema, being uncertain to claim herself as a mother or a person without a son, explains how liminal state of personal identity itself determines the identity of an individual in precariousness. The uncertainty of identity also symbolises the state of Kashmir being a land of unsettled border demarcation and that elucidates the influence of border in ascertaining the identity. Therefore, the incertitude of personal identity is a repercussion of geopolitical conflict in the borderlands of Kashmir causing precariousness.

The liminal identity of Half mother not only signifies the position of the individual in the society but also includes the encounters of instable psychological, economic, and social concerns. Haleema experiences moments of doubts which expose her to mental precariousness perceiving the mental borders of the character as a Half Mother. Through the characters, the novel comments on the struggles of precarious lives experienced by half mothers. The mental precariousness of Haleema is described when she is informed about a boy named Imran to be dead. The anxiety created by the revelation of truth expresses the uncertainty experienced by Haleema. The psychological impact caused by the precariousness of Imran’s existence is expressed as,

‘. . . According to the investigation report, something on the body says – I am sorry to say – the boy’s name was Imran. God knows.’. . .

Haleema shrivelled with fear and premonition at this news or rumour or whatever it was. She turned pale at once. Her mouth went absolutely dry, her lips almost chapped. She thought that she could not make it back home, let alone walk outside the mortuary to find an auto-rickshaw. She felt uncertain and weaker. As she walked out of that cold room that smelt of death and disinfectant. She began to shake all over. (Bashir 135)

The possible death of Imran and the uncertainty of his existence stimulates the mental instability of Haleema manifesting her precarity of self. The fear and the consequential

suffering explain the psychological trauma underwent by the character because of the prevailing precarity in her and her son's lives. Imran being the only family member of Haleema, the hope for Imran's existence acts as Haleema's meaning for existence. Imran's abduction, which was performed against the moral authority accentuates the sufferings of the protagonist. The unauthorised abduction performed based on false information pushes the protagonist to the state of precarity – a mother whose son either be living or dead. Women in conflicted zone are directly and indirectly affected by the evils of war, in the context of Kashmir, the experiences of women with 'half' relationship status causes more damage to the sufferings. Butler's observations on vulnerability in precarious lives are demonstrated through the experiences of half widows and mothers which are, "[u]nder the circumstances, pressure mounts on the half-widows . . . they struggle between new roles and responsibilities, on one side, and their own vulnerabilities and deficiencies, on the other. Not being able to bury their loved ones and mourn properly adds to psychological trauma, as they do not get any closure" (Qutab 259). The experiences of Haleema manifest the protagonist's precarity of self which is influenced by external factors, whom Butler calls "nameless elsewhere", here implying to the security forces who are ignorant of the civilians' moral and ethical positions. The fear of uncertain existence induces precariousness which has the ability to "hinder their capability to create their futures. But to live under precarious conditions today means that there is no continuity of time at all anymore" (Paur 173). The hold of precariousness on the mental stability of individuals questions the essence of existence among the people of Kashmir establishing the uncertainty.

According to the notions of precarity, disidentification of the others by the face exposes them to vulnerability and puts their ontological right to existence into question. The false assumptions created by the security forces about the ordinary people of Kashmir assuming them to be supporting the militants and working as informers stimulate the precarity of identity. This liminal state of identification and no identification expose them to violence. Butler explains precarity as a condition for violence that

The face over there, though, the one whose meaning is portrayed as captured by evil is precisely the one that is not human . . . The 'I' who sees that face is not identified with it: the face represents that for which no identification is possible, an accomplishment of dehumanization and a condition for violence. (Butler 145)

The imposition of violence on people who experiences precarious identity and existential vulnerability further escalates the condition for vulnerability and dehumanisation. The antagonist of the novel, Major Kushwaha arrests Imran Joo as a replacement for Imran Bhat for his personal advantages. This unauthorised abduction against all moral consideration was accomplished because of the populace of Kashmir being already exposed to suspicion and a state of uncertain identity, which also includes the family of Haleema. Shahnaz Bashir portrays the vulnerable situation of Haleema and Imran at the time of forced abduction:

Inside Haleema's room, in the dread and uncertainty, Imran shrivelled, waiting for her to open the door. . .

As Haleema unbolted the door, a burly, moustache trooper pushed her aside, forcing his way in. A row of uniformed men frantically burst in behind him. A bunch of them ran upstairs. Major Kushwaha followed . . . The troops who had been left outside in the dark frontyard caught hold of him by the neck of his *pheran*. Imran uttered a shrill shriek. 'Ammi! Save me!'

'Nice boy. Come on,' Major Kushwaha said as if he was luring a kid with toffee.

Haleema ran out, frustrated with fear, sobbing, and tried to wiggle Imran out of the crook of the trooper's arm.

'He is my only son, sir! He...' Haleema was desperate. (Bashir 55)

Haleema's desperation for Imran's freedom illustrates the vulnerability experienced by her. The protagonist faces vulnerability in two faces – continuous threat of suspicion and unauthorised imposition of violence against moral ethics. The imagology technique adopted by the face prevails the temptation to enforce control and violence on the precarious lives. Kashmiris experience vulnerability caused by the denial of freedom through the images that "are constructed for the purpose of defining the unknown Other. What is unknown is dangerous. To define is to have control over it and to dominate it. The image is an efficient way to dominate the unknown Other" (Derezhytska 86). Haleema endures the vulnerability of othering in her native land along with the embedded violence. Haleema represents the unheard voices of Kashmir, whose lamentations are neglected. The protagonist represents the population that was subjected to doubt their existence and endure vulnerability caused by the violence and precipitated by their precarious lives.

Though precariousness is communicated in a non-violent way to annul human life, the further progress of precarity through violence precedes dehumanisation. According to Butler, violence precipitates dehumanisation of the others, the "derealization of loss – the insensitivity to human suffering and death – becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This derealization takes place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained" (Butler 148). The incessant denial of ethical justice and precarity persuades the others to desensitise themselves from the manipulated violence. The security forces resort to the means of dehumanisation by acting ignorant to the voices of existential vulnerability. Haleema stops searching for Imran by desensitising her loss and helps the other family members of the disappeared. The derealization of loss defines the meaningless life lead by the character. As a consequence, Haleema experiences hallucinations and develops an unstable mental state to distinguish between animate

and inanimate objects which witness the tangible existence of dehumanisation. The mental precarity and the effect of dehumanisation of Haleema is described as,

Haleema says she has been talking to the walls since ages – perhaps with the cracks and nails too. She tells me they hadn't responded to her for long, but now they do, 'I swear, I swear...they do. They are decisive when I am riddles with doubts... They talk to me...and...and I heed their advice and their compelling counsel... They are my best friends, these walls.' (Bashir 173)

This excerpt explains the repercussions of dehumanisation against moral authority. The protagonist finds solace through her conversations with the inanimate objects in her house. Haleema hallucinates the existence of Imran through the inanimate objects demonstrating the precarious life experienced by her. Haleema's state of losing the orientation between the mind and body acts as a resultant of the derealization of loss and an expression of numbness towards injustice. Imposition of precarity and violence elaborates the range for dehumanisation which raises the question for human rights. The denial of freedom and voice against false obligations are the primary reasons for the acts of dehumanisation performed by the security forces, especially, in the case of forced disappearances and unauthorised violence. An uncertain state of justice prolongs the precariousness of people. In Haleema's state, the precarity continued till her death because of the precarity of justice.

## Conclusion

Precarity of self is a bilateral sequence—either uncertainty influences dehumanisation or dehumanisation acts a concomitant factor for precarity. Butler exposes the mental contemplation of choosing borders as precarity and the external role played by face in determining the precariousness of the others. The security forces as the face successfully manipulate the populace into precariousness and in contemplating the ontological position of the Others in the society. This way the Kashmir situation exemplifies the state of precariousness and the precarity of self, experienced by the people of Kashmir, and the family of the victims of forced disappearances. Due to divided opinions, the people of Kashmir are uncertain in perceiving their identity pertaining to place of belonging, inconsistent culture of society, political instability, and personal liminality. The collective suffering of uncertainty caused by existential vulnerability and liminality contribute to the sufferings faced by the people of Kashmir, half mothers, and half widows. This justifies the role of Kashmir as a borderland, being a liminal space, to the presence of precarity in all strata of life. Women in Kashmir are indirect victims of precarity, as the abducted individuals are categorised under 'disappeared persons', whereas their family members are labelled with precarity as 'half mothers' and 'half widows' which explains the in-between-ness of women in both war and society. Haleema is unsure of her identity and the dehumanisation influenced by precariousness destroys her mental stability which prompts her to dwell in-between reality and imagination, demonstrating the mental borders. Thus, the prevalence of



uncertainty in the borderlands of Kashmir stimulates the precarity of self and liminality of personal identity among the Kashmiris.

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