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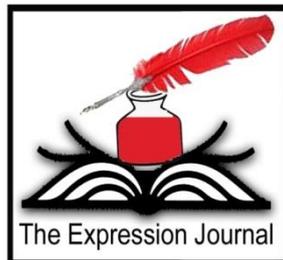
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***FAITH & FRENZY VERSUS WIDOWS AND HALF WIDOWS:
KASHMIR AS FICTION AND FACTS***

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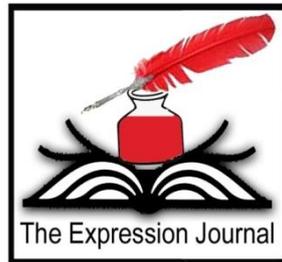
Abstract

The paper entitled “*Faith & Frenzy Versus Widows and Half Widows: Kashmir as Fiction and Facts*” is an analysis of the predicament of the people in Kashmir Valley in the light of two important works; one, *Faith & Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* by K. L. Chowdury, and the other, *Widows and Half Widows: Saga of Extra-Judicial Arrests and Killings in Kashmir*, a journalistic work by Afsana Rashid, a celebrated female journalist from the valley. Published almost a decade ago both the books try to take a keen look at the unending sufferings Kashmiris are subjected to for decades now. However, they represent two different perspectives, two entirely different depictions of the same experience. A juxtaposition of the two works helps readers divine the magnitude of the sorrows that fill the valley of which very little spills over to the world outside for the known barriers, both geographical and political.

Keywords

Kashmir, Faith, Frenzy, Widows, Half-Widows, Extra-Judicial Killings,
Trauma, Pandits, Kashmiri Muslims.

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Kashmir has been a vortex of political turmoil, controversies, occupation, power transitions, etc. for centuries. It has been so all through the known history. The mesmerising and bewitching charm and beauty of this territory in the foot of the Himalayas covered with dazzling white snow throughout the winter months and the foliage crowned months rich with the odours and hues of the summer have attracted several to its lap. The rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless alike have had a time of romance with this young bride of the terrains of the blue planet. The Mogul King Jahangir described it as the paradise on the earth. None has ever dared to challenge Jahangir's tribute to the serene and sensuous panorama of this valley of the Himalayas. Literature in all languages is replete with the depiction of the nature, life and the nuances of the people over here. *Faith & Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* by Kundan Lal Chowdury gives us an entirely different perspective on the nature, people and life in Kashmir.

A Kashmiri medical doctor of the Pundit family living in the Valley in the years of turbulence, militarisation, militancy, struggles for Azadi, etc., since its conditional and temporal annexation to India in 1947, K.L. Chowdury relates to us 17 fascinatingly interesting stories in the collection, all, noticeably, in his peculiar perspective. Given that Kashmiri people are faced with a wide range of challenging situations, and that the author does not represent the community in the forefront of the struggle, one can always look upon them as the less represented voice in literature.

"These stories are mostly about the ordinary people of Kashmir, their relationships and bonds, their toils and tussles, their follies and foibles, their hopes and fears" (writer's surname & page if possible). These dedicatory words of the book penned by the author and provided as a pre-text give us a superficial and cursory overview of the book. However, the stories demand a closer and careful attention especially in the context of the political and social situation of the territory and the ongoing organised efforts at the ethnic cleansing, militarisation and the unending dispute over the political future of Kashmir.

The cover page blurb of the book tells us that

Faith and Frenzy is a collection of stories that bring to the readers the intimate details of forgotten Kashmiris, caught in quagmire of terror and murky politics, and weighed down by the historical burden of a long confrontation between India and Pakistan. Their stories have remained untold, submerged under layers of rhetoric and politics of deceit. (n.pag)

Meanwhile, the book intentionally keeps mum on the predicament of the thousands of the young generation Kashmiris reported missing in the intensely militarised situation. Violence from the side of the fighters for Azadi, myth or real, the author pinpoints story after story. However, he holds a totally blind eye on the pathetic situation of the thousands of orphans, widows and parents bereaving their dear children in the militarised situation. He does not seem to be worried in the least about the rape, house-search and other atrocities from the side of the Indian forces there.

Most, but not all, stories take place against a backdrop of escalating militancy that brought terror, insecurity and mayhem into the lives of the people and dealt a death blow to amity, tolerance and peaceful living that had defined Kashmiri life over significant periods of history, the author argues in the blurb. However, he deliberately overlooks the circumstances, especially the political bigotry and deception, unfulfilled promises, etc., they had to face as a community following the annexation of the territory to India, the socio-political situation from which militancy sprang up. Going by the data and statistics available, Kashmiris generally do not subscribe to militancy any longer. However, their struggles by peaceful means seem to have a determined and enduring nature.

“These stories tell of Kashmiris, mostly Pundits, who were forced to flee the valley, their lives before and after the exodus and their identity crisis,” (page number) the author tells us. However, there has all along been a bigger crisis faced by the majority of the people of Kashmir, it was not just a case of identity, but of survival as a community together with their values, beliefs, ethos, etc. which seem to be immaterial to the author.

These stories of diverse nature represent a wide range of the life of the Kashmiri Pundits. The perspective is exclusively that of a Pundit in medical profession. “The Poplar of Discord,” the first story in the collection delineates the life of a Pundit family in the author’s immediate neighbourhood, a story about the discord over a property dispute bringing about the disaster of a family. The author’s detached way of dealing with the situation played a telling role in the intensifying of the crisis in the story. Besides, it further sheds light on “the drawn to oneself” kind of social life that they preferred.

“The Guru’s Last Wish,” the second story in the collection, tells us a good deal about the author’s childhood, the kind of attention he received from his teacher, the attachment he had with him, and the kind of indebtedness he felt towards him as well as the warmth of affection his teacher had to him. However, the caste-related sentiments reflected in the relationship delineated here cannot be overlooked.

“Price of a Lamb” and “Faith and Frenzy,” the third and fourth stories in the collection bring the representatives of the majority community, viz., the Kashmiri Muslims, to focal attention indulged in a task of myth-creation or fictionalising a living society, the author here obviously seems to be deviating into fanciful misrepresentation employing the craft of storytelling as an effective political tool. The Kashmiri Muslim figures, represented in an extremely biased and prejudiced light, in both these stories represent irrationality and senselessness. Blinded by communal bias and political doggedness, they fail to evaluate in a

proper light a situation of a sheer accident hurting a lamb in which the author got involved in “Price of a Lamb.” Interestingly, “Faith and Frenzy” tells us a most unheard-of sort of horrifying and blood congealing story about a few adolescent militants grilling and attempting to murder a Kashmiri Pundit for his sons’ alleged betrayal of their cause by being informers to the police and security forces. These stories very well show us how venomous and damaging the words of even a fiction writer could be to an underprivileged community in the long run.

“Insomnia,” the thirteenth story in the collection talks about a Kashmiri Muslim youth suffering from insomnia or sleeplessness following the Islamic religious indoctrination approaching the physician turned author for a medical solution to his problem. This is a most unrealistic kind of myth that Muslim social life neither in the Islamic world at large nor in Kashmir with its peculiar situation will testify. Obviously, K. L. Chowdury’s communally biased agenda in the craft of story writing betrays him in a most disarming way in the delineation of the dilemma and crisis faced by the Kashmiri youth in this story more than all the rest as he adopts a stance of imparting a realistic colour to the developments in it. Given that Muslims world over, through the thick and thin of their kind of survival, hold their firmness in faith close to their hearts. They are not shaken on ideological grounds as the author apprehends. This can be looked upon only as the author’s apprehensions and concerns that he makes spoken aloud through the mouthpiece of a Kashmiri Muslim youth, for the concerns and anguishes shared are those characteristically of one who do not belong to the community and not those of the one who belongs to it.

“Return of the Natives” is another story that catches our attention. This story tells us the story of an elderly Pundit couple of Kashmir that migrated to Jammu during the days of turbulence making their return to their hometown in Kashmir after nearly a couple of decades stay in the refugee camp. It brings to our attention the excitement of the elderly couple at the thought of going back to their home, soil, people, weather and life style after a long period’s life of uncertainty. The warmth of affection with which the people of the locality belonging to the majority community, viz., the Muslims, received them and did everything required for their resettlement in their homestead has been noticeably and adequately described in the story. The sentiment, passion, and attitude shared here by the author deserve special recognition and appreciation.

“All about Chichi,” the very last of the stories included in the collection stands out uniquely by virtue of the theme of the story and its concerns. This story and “Truce”, the twelfth story, both deal with human concerns about animals. In other words, the author’s concerns and realisations about his pets, namely, the dog Chichi, the birds in the front yard of his house and the cat that preyed on the birds that eventually got into his household. However, the attitude taken to these dumb creatures, despite all the humane virtues, the author as a Pundit, brags of indirectly in between the lines, is characterised by a telling nature of cruelty and inhumanity. The way he denied the young female pet dog, its due share of sexual experience that it pained very much to have with the visitor male dog on the ground that it will litter the place with puppies and the way he got rid of it when it was sick by administering sleep inducing drug and abandoning it in a remote place when he found it a burden, show that the author has no genuine affection, warmth of feeling or even sentiments. This is true about his attitude to animals as well as humans as reflected in the stories. His sole concern seems to be for himself and his people and not for anyone else. The sole problem, in his perspective,

seems to be his problem of displacement. This is the essence of the upper-caste mind-set the book orchestrates.

A peculiar thing about the structure and style of the stories in this collection that runs to 232 pages is that the narrator of all the stories is the author himself. He is, in his own words, a key participant in most of them. He encounters the characters as patients, and while providing professional services, finds himself entwined in the intricacies, uncertainties, and struggles of their lives. In short, these stories could be described, in the positive light, as stories of universal human circumstances of displacement.

This collection of short stories by K. L. Chowdury, however, depicts, real or unreal, only one side of the trauma that is Kashmir today. A journalistic book entitled *Widows and Half Widows: Saga of Extra-Judicial Arrests and killings in Kashmir* authored by Afsana Rashid Bhat, a celebrated young female journalist from the valley gives us a touching account of the other side of the Kashmiri trauma which neither facts nor imagination can venture to deny especially when “half-widow” is a term in currency to suggest Kashmiri women whose husbands have disappeared and were still missing during the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. These women are called “half-widows” because they have no idea whether their husbands are dead or alive. Thousands of husbands in Kashmir disappeared during the conflict. Miss Bhat’s book is about women who even after years of the disappearance of their husbands, sons and fathers are still on a daily search for their loved ones while trying to discover their own identity as to whether they are widows or not widows. Apart from economic hardships, these women have been alienated by family, society and government. This book compiles their tragedies in order to give a voice to the voiceless. Courts have failed them, successive governments have brushed aside their suffering, society has adopted an indifferent attitude and there are those who earn out of the indigence of these women. Documenting their mental agony and trauma would never have been an easy task for the author.

Falling into 25 variously titled chapters reflecting the different aspects and diverse implications of the trauma suffered by Kashmiris, Miss Bhat’s book realistically explores the predicament of the women in the Valley from all imaginable angles. Explaining the historical background of the Kashmir imbroglio in the first chapter, Miss Bhat moves on to analyse why there were too many widows in the Valley, what brought about the situation, how do Kashmiri women address the issue, how do they tackle the situations, how do they face the resultant challenges, what the attitude of the families, society, government, judiciary, etc. had been, what the direct and indirect, short term and long term, impact of the same was on their psyche as individuals and as a community. She further graphically depicts what the ground realities pertaining to their predicament were and what the implications of the same were for the years ahead. To crown all accounts, the chapters giving description of the case studies, cause a willing suspension of all disbelief, if ever there was any. Since seeing is believing, there is no denying of the eye-witness account of the horrid scenes from real life that the adventurous investigator gives.

The two books, one a collection of short stories and the other a journalistic investigation, both published almost a decade ago, quite before the article 370 of our constitution which acknowledged the special status of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in terms of autonomy and its ability to formulate laws for the state’s permanent residents was invalidated by the ruling BJP regime, present two entirely different pictures of the social reality of Kashmir. Given that investigative journalism and fact probing academic studies are faced

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with challenges of all kinds in the prevailing political situation, one can only largely rely on one's own imagination to gauge the magnitude and intensity of the current traumas and sufferings in the valley.

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