

Farhana Qazi, *Secrets of the Kashmir Valley: My Journey through the Conflict between India and Pakistan* (Pharos Media & Publishing Pvt Ltd, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi, India), 308.

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Kashmir is an unresolved, multi-faceted dispute and a deep festering wound in Indo-Pak relations. Seen through a geopolitical prism, Kashmir has been made out to be a bilateral issue and a conflict-zone. This prevents the true understanding of the life of Kashmiri women and men for whom life and death pass as fragments of daily routine. Farhana Qazi, an American scholar who is the recipient of the 21st Century Leader Award from the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in New York and the Distinguished Humanitarian Award from Southwestern University in Texas, brings life to the under-reported and undocumented pain and sufferings of Kashmiri women in her book, *Secrets of the Kashmir Valley*. The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) launched the book on May 30, 2016. Ms Qazi, in her book, skillfully portrayed the people's hope despite their pain, mixed it with political narratives, history of this ancient region and heart-wrenching stories of human sufferings. Her work is an epic tale of human tenacity and agony that has set place in Kashmir Valley: a great beauty with a great tragedy; a paradise on earth but a valley of death.

Her book is part memoir, part history. It can be divided into three parts: her memoir; her extensive interaction with Kashmiri women and men; and conclusion in which she proposes a solution to the Kashmir dispute and leaves the reader on an optimistic note.

The stories about Kashmir she grew up hearing from her mother and maternal grandmother was of a fairy tale, a paradise on earth. She had always seen Kashmir through these stories. Her grandmother and mother were part of the women resistance in Kashmir. Her mother's words, "Kashmir is worth fighting for" (p.26) had intrigued her about Kashmir. Finally, she set out on a journey to the valley but what she saw was an Indian Occupied Kashmir, under siege and saturated with senseless

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violence. She found the valley an altogether different place at night. After sunset, the lights along the roadsides are dimmed and the whole city is concealed from view, entrenched in robes of darkness. Even the street lamps, shut down by the army in the evening, are a tale of ruination that Indian Occupied Forces (IOF) written in Kashmir. She wrote, "Locals knew to stay inside. Kashmiris were forbidden to walk in the streets without purpose, and in case of an emergency, they needed to show their papers to cross security checkpoints. No one was free. Kashmir was like nothing I had known." (p.22) They have been crammed with gun-toting personnel, armored cars and tanks and security checkpoints.

Amidst all this nonsensical violence, she skillfully portrays the undocumented tenacity and resilience of the Kashmiri women. This book leaves an indelible impression upon the reader and pulls strings of his/her heart by heart-touching stories of the Kashmiri women. These women gifted her with their oral history. In this part, she describes many fascinating, emotionally touching and deeply moving stories that she wants to be heard. Kashmiris are used to bad news, even expect the worst, but they are still unprepared for death. Mughli, the lonely mother who dies searching for her son, is one such character in the book. In the late 1980s, her son was abducted by IOF for having being suspected as militant. Mughli went mad looking for him: she went to every police station, ran up and down the streets, went to burial sites and never gave up searching for her missing son. Qazi depicts tenacity and tragedy of Mughli's life. She quotes her saying, "*I want to know the truth. If he's dead, I want to give him a proper burial. I would hug his grave.*" (p.132). Mughli dies; she never gets a chance to know whether her son was alive. If there was ever a woman who should be happy, it was Mughli. If there was ever a mother who should be heard, it was Mughli.

This book is radiating with Kashmiri men and women's resilience and leaves its reader in awe of the grace with which they have been going through all this. It's a moving account of their desire to gain freedom but by changing dynamics of their freedom movement. There are three major observations that she weaved into her signature story telling: Kashmiri women are extraordinarily resilient and freedom movement cannot become successful unless they stand side by side with their men; American involvement as a third party to resolve the dispute is inevitable; and a huge demographic transition in the form of increasing

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youth bulge and establishments of the secret societies, is taking place. Despite penning down the tortures and traumas that are altering Kashmiris lives, Farhana Qazi leaves the reader on an optimistic note: there is hope in Kashmiri youth. On this note, she tends to believe Kashmiris are able to speak for themselves; their voice will be heard; and they will get freedom ultimately. The passion of freedom has been passed onto the next generations and the song that was anthem of freedom for the older generation still warms the blood of youth of Kashmir:

*My Shangri-La beneath the summer moon,
I will return again.
Like the dust that lifts high in June,
When moving through Kashmir.*