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Firdaus in flames

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Book Review

Firdaus In Flames
By H.K. KAUL
Virgo Publications
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I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
T.S. Eliot

Teetering on the edge of a civilization ready to collapse after almost two millennia of Christianity in Europe, the unheroic hero in Eliot's poem, *Gerontion*, sums up his situation in these lines addressed to Jesus. Such might well be the lament of the Kashmiri today as he looks back to his even longer history. The horrors played out daily on the streets and alleys of towns and villages of Kashmir; the death-dance of conflicting forces unmindful of the consequences of their 'actions'; and between them, the ordinary people waiting for the promised 'logical conclusion', at once the actors and spectators of this latest form of a medieval Morality Play! No one who is even distantly connected with Kashmir can remain unaffected. But the responses are different. Some rage with battle-cries of blood and thunder, some prefer to wallow in self-pity, still others choose a sullen silence, while some brave spirits like Mr. Kaul, give themselves an utterance in verse. His aim is noble, the motive honourable: to make a passionate plea for the return of peace. But the pity is that in the wreckage of the times, no passion can remain unadulterated.

Firdaus In Flames is an attempt to record the sufferings of the people of Kashmir during the last few years and to suggest hopefully that peace, order and harmony will return. The author seems to believe that the concern of its patron saints, the prophets of great religions- and the innate compassion of the people themselves will redeem its spirit and restore its well being, wiping off the encrustations of blood. Myth, legend and history are brought together to form the backdrop of the unfolding action and a tale of suffering, violence and breakdown of a way of life is told in Fourteen-line stanzas. The book begins with a Prelude in which the history of Kashmir from its legendary origin from the mythical lake *Satisar* to the beginning of the present turbulence is condensed into twenty-five stanzas. Modelling the narrative on the Epic form, he goes on to

describe the background of the conflict at various levels, i.e., between the people and against authority, the events that lead to a full-blown war-like situation, the catastrophe in human terms and finally the hope for happy resolution. The protagonists are Abdul and a set of young – some of them real-life actors in the current tragedy – who have the usual reasons for discontent and rebellion that every youthful generation has. Driven by an ideology — with which Mr. Kaul has little sympathy – they launched a violent struggle. But once caught in the vortex of events let loose, they begin to speak in different voices and soon realize that they are obeying a strategy in which they are mere pawns in a much bigger game. The violence sees the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits and the killing of a prophet of peace Taalib, among others. The action now keeps shifting between heaven and earth, with the focus on Taalib, who even after death continues to be tormented by the devastation – human, cultural and material – of his beloved Kashmir. Before he petitions Allah on its behalf, he meets and enters into long dialogue with not only the long dead Kashmiri saints, Lal Ded and Nundrishi, the woman poet of love Habba Khatun, but also with Krishna, Buddha, the Prophet Mohammad, Jesus and Guru Nanak. Their different statements in answer to his queries merely reinforce his idealistic view of Kashmiri's historical past and future destiny- that it is basically a land of peace, tolerance, brotherhood where Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits have a common spiritual quest as their destinies are interwoven and hence any deviation is a temporary aberration sure to disappear in the new dawn of peace. But how this is to come about is not spelt out. Of course, a literary artist is not bound to offer solutions, nor is conflict-resolution his role. But since this book is definitely political – making a 'statement' rather than poetry – the reader's dissatisfaction on this count is justified. Lal Ded and Nundrishi are made to give highly simplistic, yet strangely muddled, versions of the Kashmiri Saiva and Rishi philosophies they respectively propounded. I wonder what comfort the wretched can derive from the words. Mr. Kaul assigns to the Almighty:

> "My child, I am God, I am Brahman, I am Allah,
> Look around you, my Prophets all teach My ways.
> Life lifts its wings
> From the farthest centres of this universe,
> To take routes, paths faiths, it likes or, it thrusts
> Surging upwards to open infinite doors
> My Prophets are my arms, my ears, my eyes
> In the Universe who guides life to routes and their doors
> They appear to disappear when life is stuck to the pulls of hell--"

The philosophies voiced by the prophets are no less platitudinous:

> "Belief that is brought about by force will
> never remain true to its course."

Consequently, the heavenly dialogues become rather uninspiring.

> "Of hell, paths are darkened with the colour of deeds.
> So infinite are the ways of freedom to navigate,
> A lone passage can get cramped and darken
> Yet, all paths grow with each breath of his universe."

My main problem with the book, however, is its form. Putting on the deceptive garb of an epic, it swings uneasily between that genre and an elegy. The presence of dead heroes, gods and prophets inevitably brings to mind classical epics where too they dole out advice and sympathy to the human players. But setting itself up in comparison with Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* can only be to the cost of this book. At first glance the fourteen-line stanza promises to be a fine vehicle for a narrative, bringing up visions of Vikram Seth's *Golden Gate*, but the lines refuse to be scanned! This is awkward as one expects at least the discipline of *metre* in such an apparently regular stanza. While some lines stay an easy *iambic* tetsrametre, others stretch on stumblingly. Notice the first three lines of a stanza:

"From age of stone to age of mind
This bowl of the valve has let primitive man,
Sage Kashyapa, Nagas, Aryans,
Jews, Iranians grind…"

Even the concluding couplets betray the arbitrary touch, in not always staying together. The metrical weakness gives the narration a jerky movement, interfering with the rythm.

The prelude pre-supposes familiarity not only with the broad streams of Kashmiri History and Thought, but also with words and their usage prevalent in Kashmir.

Readers of newspaper reports on the current situation in Kashmir may understand the word 'Azadi', but even they might not be quite ready for *Jenab*, or *Tehreek*, which turn up with irritating regularity in the text, or the mainfold attributes of Allah in Arabic. True, a glossary has been painstakingly compiled, but for a book which lays claim to being poetry, it can only be a burden. The allusions, references, connotations and nuances of terms will be lost on a wider readership.

The races, cultures and profound philosophies that contributed to the growth of the ideal *Kashmiriyat* that is close to Mr. Kaul's heart cannot just be lumped together without the courtesy of a commentary to explain their significance to the uninitiated. Perhaps words like *Nagas Pisacha, bindu* and *spanda* might provoke the reader to explore this territory! *Firdaus* itself is Persian for paradise and might be difficult to relate to Kashmir for those unfamiliar with word, unless their memories are nudged by the recent TV serial. "Firdaus", also dealing with the present turmoil in Kashmir.

The book is lightened by some poignant images of individual tragedies and the warm glow of humanity in scenes like:

"In this gloom, a flare lights up
The city: A Pundit's house in
Downtown shoots up in flames.
The heads and hearts and their
Masks melt in the burning.
Muslims – men and women –to gain
Upon the flames rush through, weeping

And wailing, showers of household
Utensils littered with earthings of pots….
The neighbours pick up, from the burning pyre
Remnants aflame of a woman's attire."

In spite of its mixed metaphors, there is a certain power in the horror-image conjured up in:

"Taalib opens a window on hell.
From all sides in this game
Creatures, strange in their features, yell
To those whose nets woven from fire
Have burnt holy orders.
Hands drip blood, some aim
With arrows of shame. Some eyes
Exude streams of fire, some inflame
Their last vestiges of hope."

There are also some pretty evocative pictures of Kashmiri landscape:

"Willows, plane tress and populars fence
Shimmering rice fields terraced
On slopes going to where woodlands begin:
The eyes and smiles en route declared
Joy in the Valley could still be shared."

But often the effect is marred by jerky verse or weak endings and anti-climax to otherwise 'brave lines:

"Now from the streets of the underworld
We have graduated to the highways
Of battlefield – to be unveiled."

In the final analysis, the book has the strength in its context, which is bound to strike the deepest emotional chords among the Kashmiris, particularly those in exile who have suffered the pain of being uprooted and the anguish of loss. The very names of persons and places cherished in collective memory will bring forth a nostalgic Kashmiri cultural pattern. Looking at Kashmir today where a whole generation has come up with hardly any knowledge of its roots, the author's attempt to resurrect the past values is commendable. It is quite possible that the future generations might well ask whether the Kashmir eulogised for its religious tolerance and affectionate human relationship ever existed in reality. The young are taught to dismiss the past cultural evolution and emancipation as an exercise in myth making. But they forget that they themselves are part of a huge conspiracy of silence that seeks to muffle any memories of a shared past of the Kashmiri-Muslims and the Pandits. A voice like Mr. Kaul's therefore, deserves to be heard, if only for the bravery of its effort. The ideological bias is evident in his choice of names and events to highlight positively. I do not mean this in any negative sense- no work of any significance can be

entirely free of ideology; only the degree of subtlety may vary. Nor can ones milieu of history be free from it. The intellectual, cultural and emotional baggage one carries as a product of a particular socio-cultural pattern determines ones perspective. To put it figuratively, it is the colour of the lens in your spectacles that lights up the landscape in green or saffron. Whether one sees *Firdaus* in the same light as the author does, the fact remains that it is its ideology that gives the book the moral structure to hold it together.