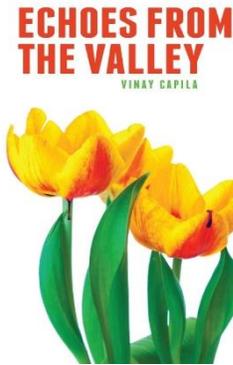


Vinita Agrawal Reviews *Echoes From The Valley* by Vinay Capila



Title: Echoes from the Valley
Author: Vinay Capila
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Country: India
Language: English
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Genre: Fiction
Pages: 218



Echoes From The Valley by Vinay Capila is a fictional work about the painful exodus of Hindu Pandits from Kashmir—an ostentatiously Muslim state. Any book that is set in the ethereally beautiful state of Kashmir is almost a hedonistic read—with descriptions of majestic snow-capped mountains, ebullient rivers Jhelum and Lider, the verdant valleys and breathtaking violet saffron fields. However, the author points out that such a view of Kashmir is at best a romantic view. Though it is a work of fiction, the story is based on the real-time incidents that marked the terrible ousting of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley.

The author begins the story by describing the wonderful friendship between three friends—Ravi, Roshan and Bashir. Their bond, rooted in school days, matures into the later years of their life but acquires sadder flavors with the painful passage of time.

Their first tryst with the grim realities of this paradisiacal land occurs when the three friends plan an innocuous trek to the base of the Kolhai Glacier. Their adventure is interwoven with warmth, kindness and genuine help from the local Gujjars (sheepherders) and caretakers of the rest houses but is also fraught with talk of dangerous presence of terrorists nearby. They narrowly escape an attack on their life—thanks only to their fate. But the sense of unease and foreboding mars not just their trip but it leaves a mark to linger in their mind for life.

“I don’t like the sound of all this,” Ravi muttered. “Who are these people? What do they want? By all appearances they could be Afghan Taliban, but what were they doing in this valley, and where are they headed?”

Such are the ominous words from one of the protagonists which are sharper. Through this small incident Vinay Capila sows the seeds of unease and danger in the reader’s minds. We are now prepared for gorier incidents with devastating repercussions.

It’s odd how Bashir often refers to the areas south of his state as India and he plans to open a handicrafts shop in India. And this is the reality how the locals in Kashmir perceive their identity. Although it is disturbing to digest that while the Kashmiris are geographically and

politically a part of India, their nationalities, their patriotic zeal and their mental identity belong to some independent territory or worse still to another neighboring country.

The author, Vinay, has spent a fair amount of his time in Kashmir. His mother belonged to the state and he dedicates the book to her saying 'her mind never left it (Kashmir).' Vinay's tale of the rude ousting of Kashmiri Pandits is definitely a firsthand account—of delicious *bakkarkhanis*, kadam saag and bhaat, the Kheerbhavani Shrine in the interiors of Ganderbal and the descriptions of how the Pandeys had records of all the Hindu families living there.

His understanding of their tragic migration is personal but he takes the voices of three youths to describe the process. It is poignant to note that the exuberance and optimism of young minds soon fades into grey resignation in the face of injustice and insults that are beyond their control.

Somewhere towards the middle of this 137-page novel, one of the trio – Roshan and his family – faces the first direct loss of house and life because of the antagonism that terrorists fuel against the Hindus within the Kashmiri society. The author says, rather poetically:

'The alienation was seeded in spring and it exploded in autumn. It appeared as if an invisible hand had hovered over the valley and covered it with its dark shadow.'

The author strives to highlight the mitigating actions of the army in the whole plot by bringing in the characters like Vikram, the commandant of the CRP Battalion, but he is ultimately forced to describe the situation in these words:

"'Gulam Ali sahib, I would like to disagree with you. You talk of the 'voice of Kashmiri people'. I would like to ask, who are the Kashmiri people? Are these thousand, or two thousand, or even ten thousand people who join processions, or stone vehicles, or burn shops and houses, the Kashmiri people? Is this the voice that needs to be heard that you are talking of? Or is it the silent majority, which includes most of us here, and the large number of people that Shafiq Ahmed sahib talked about just now, who have so far sat back in impotent patience, whose voice needs to be heard? Let us not be so naïve as to deny the fact that these agitations, and the turmoil we have been facing all these years, is sponsored by Pakistan and has been brought to our doorsteps by terrorists...'

As a reader, one wishes that the author had gone deeper into the roots of the problem, had exposed its ugly pith, had narrated some of the real horrors that Kashmiri Pandits had to endure in a decade of exodus. This would have uncovered the true picture of something that shook the very foundation of the life of the Kashmiri Hindus. The events uprooted the victims from their soil and left them flailing in a sea of humanity that largely ignored them and certainly did not provide any succor or rehabilitation, whatsoever.

While Vinay Capila exposes this sad truth, the reader certainly looks for more on this greatly traumatic period in the life of a wonderful, brilliant and beautiful community.

All in all, the book does a good job of refocusing our attention on the miserable plight of these people and also on the overall degeneration of the state of Jammu and Kashmir because of insurgency and terrorism.

A smooth reading, that draws in the readers' mind by describing the innocuous journey of three friends fated to end in gruesome repercussions in the long run. A book worth reading because it gives a firsthand account of the day-to-day life in the valley and of the fears and horrors smoking on its rim.

Perhaps the book could be well summed up in these thoughts that float through Ravi's mind:

'Ravi sighed as he thought back on the words of the Gujjar patriarch: perhaps a benevolent God had guided the gujjars' travels, to stand in their path to prevent an evil fate. Perhaps it was the not so benevolent God who had prevented Ravi from conveying the information to the security forces in Pahalgam. But then, who could decide on what God willed – and why? Maybe that was what God's will was: to stand aside and watch the human puppets weave their tapestry. He could not be a Hindu god, or a Muslim god; an Indian god, or a Pakistani god. He could not take sides in the little machinations of puny people. To Him they were all the same. If they created differences amongst themselves it was their problem. If they thought they could convert a paradise into a hell, it was their folly. Perhaps in a decade or two they would come to their senses; for nothing was for ever, and, in any case, every phase was just an altered facet of what had been before. Till then ...'

Thought provoking words indeed of a land that had been usurped by a nation of infidels even though a majority of its people were Muslims, all because they had for generations acquiesced to being ruled by the Hindu kings.

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