Chapter I

*Curfewed Night: Journey of the Self*

Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night* published in 2009, is written in the backdrop of armed conflict in Kashmir which began in 1989. As Peer belongs to the post-partition era of Kashmir, his early childhood has experienced the turbulent period of 90s. A vicious cycle of conflict, violence, armed insurgency, and bloodshed had struck the valley. It is against this background that Peer has grown up and has a firsthand experience of the conflict. Anguished as he is about Kashmir’s destiny, he resolutely refuses to embrace the role of a victim or a mere spectator that could so easily have been his but he chooses to write about it and gives it a legitimate voice. An urge to portray the misery, agony, pathos, sufferings etc of the hapless population of Kashmir caught in a web of brutal savagery of happenings made him to write the novel titled *Curfewed Night*. He has painted this novel with the grim pictures of violence, political discrimination, horrors of gun-culture, deaths, disappearances, rapes, trauma and torture of conflict ridden people of Kashmir. Mudasir Ahmed Mir and Vinita Mohindra in an article, “Writing Resistance: A Study of Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night*” remarks:

> The work is the representation of the Kashmir valley, its culture and custom, trade and tradition, economy and commerce, life and death, pupil and people, situation and circumstance etc. . . . It is the depiction of Kashmiri culture since the outbreak of the armed conflict in the late 20th century i.e. 1989. It reveals the anxiety of the natives, and their unfortunate halt due to ubiquitous disturbance. The portrayal of the events, episodes, incidents, and accidents etc. are authentic and based on author’s real life situations and firsthand experiences. (21-22)

In this novel, Peer paints the naked horrors of the conflict of 90s with all its precision and cumulative detail. He has taken the particular events from the history of 90s of Kashmir and discussed about their deadly effects on the life of the common masses of Kashmir. Therefore, it appears that the novel is a reflection in microcosm about the
reality of the events that took place during that period. Lukacs comments in *Writer and Critic*:

> The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provides a sense of an inseparable integrity. (34)

Peer has borrowed the title “Curfewed Night” from Agha Shahid Ali’s poem “I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Night” which appears in *The Country Without a Post Office*, which was published in 1997. Ali writes:

> One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains
> To will the distant mountain to glass.
> The city from where no news can come
> Is now so visible in its curfewed night. (1-4)

*The Country Without a Post Office*, originally called as “Kashmir Without Post Office,” takes its impetus from the 1990 armed uprising of Kashmir against India, which led to political violence and closed all the Kashmir’s post offices for seven months. It narrates a woeful tale and unabated sufferings of the people of Kashmir. The poem takes the reader to a world where the large scale agony, oppression, mass exodus of Pandits, curfews, torture, mass rapes, and army camps has made the life of the people living in Kashmir hell. He through this poem narrates the sordid tale of his homeland which the world has forgotten.

The title of the novel, *Curfewed Night* is apt and suggestive of the plot. In Kashmir curfew is like a collective strangulation. Everything is shutdown, locked up, and besieged. It chokes the people by cutting off the very sustenance of life: food, medicine, etc. Kashmir’s modern history is bookmarked by chapter after chapter of sieges and curfews. The title of the book conveys the horrifying experience of common Kashmiris of being trapped in never ending curfews and of living within the borders of a conflict zone amongst the bloodshed, chaos, and the turmoil that has engulfed the valley for more than
two decades. On reading first few pages of *Curfewed Night* it becomes clear that Peer through his narrative is going to deal with the pathos, sufferings, brutalities, atrocities and injustice meted out to the innocent people of Kashmir. He bluntly presents the misery and grief caused to the people by the brutalities of the military and militants exposing the mental landscape of people ruled by uncertainty and fear. It reveals an unexplored facet of plight of the ordinary people and their daily struggle for existence in turbulent Jammu and Kashmir. Abhishek Chaterjee in a review of *Curfewed Night* comments:

> The atmosphere of grief, terror, threat, misery, anguish etc caused to Kashmiris is well described through the narrative. The brutal torture caused both by security forces, paramilitary and militants have put natives on shocking brink. At present more than six lakh of Indian troops are scattered for the protection and safety of the people in the valley; but the inhabitants never feel secured rather experience threat from such protectors. (2)

In *Curfewed Night*, Peer though captures the conflict of 90s but at the same time refers to the Kashmir’s history in order to rip open the heart of conflict. He is genuinely interested in the present-day Kashmir problem and looks at it historically. He seems to be fully aware of the latest concept of time and the role of history in the lives of people. He attempts to discover the past in its relation to the present. Georg Lukacs also values historical reality and calls it as objective reality:

> The pliancy of historical material, which Feuchtwanger praises, is in fact a trap for the modern writer. For his greatness as a writer will depend upon the conflict between his subjective intentions and the honesty and ability with which he reproduces objective reality. The more, and the more easily, his subjective intentions prevail, the weaker, poorer and thinner will be his work. (244)

Similarly in *Curfewed Night* Peer brings in Kashmir’s history where the reader is taken back to the time when the last ruler of Kashmir, Yusuf Shah Chak was captured and dethroned by the Mughal king, Akbar and taken away to northern India, never to return back. He died in anonymity in Bihar. The unbearable separation turned Habba
Khatoon, the wife of Yusuf Chak, an ascetic. She roamed through the villages of Kashmir and sang songs in his memory. The songs and her epic wait embedded with sorrow and pain earned her a title “the nightangle of Kashmir.”

Akbar, the Mughal emperor of Delhi, invaded Kashmir in December 1585 . . . Fearing an eventual defeat, Yusuf agreed to visit the court of the Mughal emperor for peace talks, where he accepted the Mughal sovereignty. . . . Akbar imprisoned Yusuf and a year later sent him to Bihar as a petty Mughal official, where he died in anonymity a few years later. Habba Khatoon roamed the villages of Kashmir, singing songs of separation, yearning to be reunited with her beloved. (134)

After that Kashmir passed from ruler to ruler. It was ruled by Mughals in late sixteenth century, Afghans in eighteenth century and in nineteenth century by Sikhs from whom the British acquired it and sold it to a Hindu Dogra King, Maharaja Gulab Singh for seventy five lakh rupees:

Akbar conquered the Valley in 1586 after encountering stiff resistance and discomfiture in early attempts . . . Ahmed Shah Abdali dispatched a small force and easily conquered the land in 1752. . . . The Pathans were followed by Sikhs in 1819 when at the invitation of Kashmir nobles headed by Birbal Dhar, Ranjit Singh succeeded in annexing the Valley to his expanding dominions. . . .

By the end of Sikh rule in 1846 when the Dogra Rajputs got the Valley as a gift from the British in recognition of services rendered by them during Anglo-Sikh Wars. . . . Raja Gulab Singh had to pay Rs. 75, 00,000 to the British to secure the gift according to the terms laid down in the “Treaty of Amritsar.” (Bazaz 7-10)

In 1947, when partition divided India into Pakistan, Maharaja Hari Singh, then the ruler of Kashmir requested Indian Government for armed support in backdrop of Pakistani invasion into the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In order to seek India’s help, he
was made to accede to Indian dominion by the agreement of accession. Indian troops succeeded in halting the Pakistani forces, by driving them back. This led unending hostilities between India and Pakistan that ranged from low level conflicts to war. At the time, British authorities stated that the question of Kashmir’s accession should be settled by a plebiscite as soon as law and order was re-instated and the invading forces had left. However the plebiscite never took place. The things changed drastically and took ugly shape when the insurgency in the state started in the year 1989 against the alleged rigged election of 1987 which ripped the peace and political stability of the state forever. The ongoing conflict, followed by the anguish, agony, bloodshed and terrorism has prevailed since then and it continues even now. Kashmir, once a paradise on earth has now become a paradise lost where a web of torture, imprisonment, killings, rapes, curfews, and similar other brutalities and atrocities have ensnared it as well as its people. The late 1989 and early 1990 saw a wide spread armed rebellion in Kashmir. The outbreak of unrest not only changed Kashmir but also the lives of its people. The narrative of contemporary Kashmir is brimmed with agonies and sufferings that the Kashmiris have been subjected to by the twisted turns of wanton race for political power whereas the innocent folks have been keeping themselves on the sidelines wishing ardently of something else. The nightmare of 90s in Kashmir submerged it into death and destruction. Peer writes:

The agreement of accession that Hari Singh signed with India in October 1947 gave Kashmir great autonomy. . . . Gradually this autonomy disappeared . . . In the following decades India installed puppet rulers, eroded the legal status of Kashmiri autonomy, and ignored the democratic rights of Kashmiris. . . . In 1987, five years Sheikh’s death, the Indian government rigged state elections, arresting opposition candidates and terrorizing their supporters. . . .

The bottled up resentment against Indian rule and the treatment of Kashmiris erupted like a volcano. (13)

In the beginning of the novel the narrator is shown enjoying his childhood in Kashmir, a beautiful, peaceful mountainous paradise where the regular, slow rhythms of
village life made up one’s existence. He grew up in the foothills of the Himalayas in the beautiful valley reading William Shakespeare, Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and Daniel Defoe. He lived a happy childhood, surrounded by a loving family and tight knit community, comprising of both Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits. The writer also refers to the peaceful and secular atmosphere which prevailed in the valley during his childhood i.e. prior to 1989. Both religions, Hindu and Muslim were at peace with each other. A sense of brotherhood and harmony prevailed in the valley. Hindu women used to visit Muslim Sufi shrines to seek blessing without any fear. Peer says:

Islam in Kashmir had borrowed elements from Hindu and Buddhist past; the Hindus in turn were influenced by Muslim practices. In my childhood, nobody raised an eyebrow if Hindu women went to a Muslim shrine to seek blessings of a saint. The religious divide was visible only on the days India and Pakistan played cricket. (195)

Narrator’s internal world consisted of American comics, Bollywood movies and film songs. His childhood was relatively serene and uncomplicated, bound up with the circadian rhythms of village life and the seasonal cycles of farm work and winter slowdown. Gifted with rich imagination and deft of thought, Peer uses imagery to create realism. There is vivid sensory imagery to capture the appearance and the atmosphere of his childhood home where he used to play with his brother, Wajahat and neighbours. Peer poetically describes his village environment, open paddy fields, scraggy icy peaks of majestic Himalayas, flamboyant stream, rich flora and fauna, village houses with thatched roofs, running and roaring brooks, latticed huts and poplar lined highways in an artistic manner. He writes:

It would follow the black, ribbon-like road dividing vast expanses of paddy and mustard fields in a small valley guarded by the mighty Himalayas as two or three floor mud and brick houses with tin and thatch roofs faced the road. A few were brightly painted and most were naked brick; dust and time had coloured their rough timber windows and doors a deep brown. (9)
Contrasting with the destruction and devastation faced by Kashmir and its people, Peer gives a beautiful and detailed account of the valley and its beauty. Remembering the peaceful childhood days and the beauty of Kashmir, he gives a poignant description of four seasons— Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn, each season defining its own characteristics and signifying the blissful childhood memories of the narrator. The narrator started his odyssey in winter when the vale was covered with white blanket of snow. Winter on one side indicates the smoothness but on the other hand it denotes the sufferings of the people as everything withers during this season. The snow-peaked mountains glisten in the winter sun, and snow slide slowly from the roof of the houses. The novel gives beautiful picture of narrator and his brother enjoying the months of winter. They used to make snowmen, slide down the slope of the hill or play cricket on frozen water of a pond. After the winter, spring arrives bringing along green meadows, and the blooming yellow mustard flowers. The spring indicates rejuvenation of life and brings the season of flowers and chirping songs. After spring, in summer the mustard crop is harvested and rice seedlings are planted. Then comes autumn, when grain is threshed and stored. And in orchards, apple trees are laden with ripe apples ready to be plucked. Peer says:

In winter, snow slid slowly from our roof and fell on our lawns with a thud. My brother Wajahat and I made snowmen using pieces of charcoal for their eyes. . . We would often slide down the slope of the hill overlooking our neighbourhood or play cricket on the frozen waters of a pond near the hill. . . Spring was the season of green mountains and meadows, blushing snow and an expanse of yellow mustard flowers in the fields around our village. . .

In summer, after the mustard was reaped, we planted rice seedlings. . . Over more cups of kahwa, the grain stalks were threshed in autumn. Grains were stored in wooden barns and haystacks rose like mini-mountains in the threshing fields, around which the children played hide and seek. And the apples in our orchards would be ready to be plucked,
graded, packed into boxes of thin willow planks, and sold to an apple merchant. (1-3)

Further elaborating on the culture and tradition of the people of Kashmir, narrator gives the description of his happy life and of his family before the onset of insurgency. He describes how they used to eat dinner together in kitchen-cum drawing room. The dinner was always served when his grandfather would come. They all would sit around the long yellow sheet laid on the floor. The dinner with grandfather highlights the scenario of Kashmiri family with common traditions and ethos. In the morning narrator’s family would gather to have breakfast where pink coloured salty milk tea with lavasas (Bread) was severed:

Dinner often began with grandfather leaning against a cushion in centre of the room . . . mother would put aside her knitting kit or the papers of her students and briskly move to arrange the plates and bowls. . . . Wajahat would half-heartedly bring out the long yellow sheet. . . . We would form a circle with grandfather as its nucleus and eat . . . We would gather in the morning around a samovar of pink coloured salty milk tea and then grandfather and mother left to teach. (4-5)

But the apparent serenity and calmness was merely the glassy surface, hiding a quagmire beneath. The shadow of Kashmir’s turbulent history and unresolved conflict never goes away and marked its presence even in narrator’s childhood. Soon the scenario of peace and harmony changed drastically and narrator’s blissful childhood started collapsing around him by the web of tumultuous conditions, turning his world topsy-turvy. According to the writer the year of 1987, when India rigged state election and arrested and tortured opposition political activists, turned the paradise of Kashmir into a nightmare from which its people never wake. The narrator was just thirteen, when his world changed by the tumultuous conditions in the valley. He writes, “The war of my adolescent had started” (14). A vicious cycle of violence unleashed in the valley, when young men lured by the freedom movement crossed the border to get training and returned as fighters to revolt against India. The games of his childhood were replaced by
the passion for Kalashnikovs and guns. The youth began to romanticize war and enjoy the sight of militants with guns in their hands. They began to idolize freedom fighters and separatists. The separatists became their heroes thus affecting the psyche of the young generation of Kashmir. The glamour of freedom movement fascinated the youth and many of them joined militant organizations leaving their family members in agony and pain.

By the summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control, for arms training in the Pakistan controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes. . . . Like almost every teenager, I wanted to join them. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, like the first kiss on adolescent lips. (24)

In Kashmir radicalized ideology of separatists had spread to every section in 90s. Even the narrator was influenced by them. He too wanted to cross border and fight for Valley’s Independence. But his family revolted against his desire and prevented him from joining any militant organization. Louis Althuser in his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” has talked about the state using repressive state elements in order to maintain order of the state and control over people. The repressive elements consist of the government, the administration, the courts, the prison, and the army, which mainly function by violence or immediate threat of violence. In the same vein in order to pacify the rebellious province and crush the incipient rebellion the Indian government deployed military, paramilitary, and police force in massive numbers. They rebelled with arms and ammunitions. The anti- India uprising was treated with cruelty. Kashmir became centre of army camps, paramilitary bunkers, check posts and security forces. The Indian forces responded ruthlessly to the rising pitch of the demand for self determination. They arrested and tortured hundreds of young men by dragging them out of their houses, “throughout the night of 19th January, paramilitary men slammed doors in Srinagar and dragged out young men” (14). Dr. Sheikh Showkat Hussain in his essay, “Non-Violent Phases of Kashmir’s Resistance Post-1947” also talks about the brutality of the Indian army on the innocent people of Kashmir, “the Indian army’s counter-insurgency operations proved to be a bitter experience for Kashmiris. We saw villages burning,
civilians being targeted, bombardments, youth being detained, and torture centres, sprouting everywhere” (125).

As militancy gained momentum, Kashmiri Pandits were forced to flee their ancestral homeland, Kashmir. Targeted killings and assassination of pro-Indian Muslims as well as of Kashmiri Pandits were being carried out by the militants. Killings and threats scared the Pandits and they left the valley for their survival. In the novel, narrator felt very sad after observing the absence of Kashmiri Pandits from the gardens, neighbourhood and classrooms. The absence of Kashmiri Pandits with whom he shared a close bond left him dejected.

Along with killing hundreds of pro-India Muslims ranging from political activists to suspected informers for Indian intelligence, the militants killed hundreds of Pandits on similar grounds, or without a reason. The death had scared the Pandits and thousands, including my classmates and their families, had left the Valley by March 1990 for Jammu, Delhi, and various other Indian cities and towns. (22)

Kundan Lal Chowdhary, a Kashmiri poet and writer in an essay, “It is for your own good to leave” comments on the conditions that led to the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley. He felt pained to see his brothers flee like that from the Valley where they had spent their life in peace. With the start of insurgency people of his community were selectively targeted and even newspapers carried threat for the Pandits on regular basis. This gave rise to insecurity and vulnerability among the community and they began to migrate to save their lives. He remarks:

A spate of indiscriminate abductions, tortures, rapes and murders of the Kashmiri Pandits ensued. The victims were ordinary innocent civilians—men, women, and children, who had nothing to do with any political ideology or organization. Their only fault was that they were Pandits. . . .
There is an all-pervasive sense of fear and insecurity in the community. (19-20)
Peer has conveyed a sense of vanishing world moving outward from the bucolic joys of Kashmiri village life to the involvement of militants and Indian armed forces. The tug of war between these two entities turned the valley into hellish place of battle ground. In the skirmish between the army and militants, the innocent people of valley suffered. They had to bear the brunt of terror at the hands of merchants of deaths. The people of Kashmir were introduced to new lexical items that became a part of their dictionary-crackdowns, search operations, identification parades, cross firing, custodial killings, disappearances, etc. The life of common people of Kashmir had become an ordeal of checkpoints, continuous queuing there to be frisked, interrogated, and humiliated. Kashmir was definitely a city in siege—mentally, physically, and emotionally. Every person, supposedly on daily errand, had to stop few meters away from the army camp and form queue to a bunker with their raised hand to be frisked and checked and were asked for their identity cards. Identity cards had become like air, food, and water, important for survival. If one stepped out of the home one had to carry it all the time. Like all the other things, this piece of paper had also become the part of their lives. Apart from those who worked for the local government and had state identification cards, farmers, shopkeepers, and the persons like them were also expected to carry some sort of identity proof in their case a ration card. Peer narrates:

Every pedestrian and automobile had to stop a hundred metres from the camp; people had to raise their hands and walk in a queue to a bunker, where a soldier frisked them and checked identity cards. No farmers, shopkeepers, or artisans had any official papers though, except for maybe a ration card with his address and names of family members written on it. . . . I too bought an identity card . . . whenever I was stopped by soldiers on the street or was walking past one of their numerous check posts. It became a part of me. (20)

Arif Ayaz Parrey, a conflict activist and fiction writer in his essay, “Kashmir: Three Metaphors for the Present” writes about the necessity of carrying an identity card in Kashmir. Without carrying them they cannot step out of their homes. In Kashmir an identity card is not just a small, insignificant piece of paper but a proof of one’s identity.
It can be the difference between life and death; one cannot afford not to carry it. He remarks:

The disproportionate number of security personnel and the disproportionate amount of power and impunity they wield under the AFSPA and other means that the life of ordinary Kashmiris is turned into living hell. There is bunker every few hundred metres and a camp for every few villages. There are so many security checks and so many orders to produce ID proofs that the whole of Kashmir is transferred into jail for the natives. (236)

Every one directly or indirectly was affected by the conditions that were prevailing there for the past almost more than twenty years. No one was left unstained by the violence and loss. Even the children did not escape the brunt of the war. They were deprived of a peaceful and serene childhood. They became helpless witness to the history. The life of a student in the Kashmir valley was fraught with danger. The journey from school to home was filled with the possibility of being caught in crossfire or encountering a landmine. They learned the English war words before the alphabets. Terror words like grenade, bomb, curfew, crackdown, etc. had become the part of their daily life. Peer gives a very tough account of the life of children in Kashmir. The narrator narrates his childhood incident in which once his bus back to home was caught in a clash between paramilitary forces and militants, where he and other passengers had a narrow escape. When the bus in which narrator and other passengers were travelling reached a village, Silgam, they heard a loud explosion. A land mine was planted by militants to attack paramilitary truck which was traveling on the same road. After that a gun battle was fought between the two i.e. paramilitary forces and militants. But due to their good fate no soldier was killed in the attack. Otherwise they would have to bear the consequences of the attack. Peer writes:

Homecomings were fraught with danger. The fighting had changed the meaning of distance. I went home almost every weekend from my school. . . . But the six mile ride in a local bus was dangerous. Military and
paramilitary trucks drove on the same road throughout the day, carrying supplies between various camps or going on raids in the villages. Guerillas hiding in the fields by the road would often fire at convoys or detonate landmines planted in attacks, firing in all directions and beating anyone they could lay their hands on. (39)

Peer’s sole purpose in writing this narrative is to present before the world the woes and worries of the people of Kashmir. The novel is full of barbaric, cruel and non-humanistic actions meted out to the people living under constant fear in a besieged place where life was neither pleasant nor easy for them. With growing harassment over the years, Kashmiris developed a sense of fear and revulsion, and the slightest mention of the armed forces triggered hysterical reactions. This fear is the consequence of the reign of terror inflicted upon the people of Kashmir by the militants and the Indian armed forces fighting each other for control. Almost every small or big action either by the security forces or the militants resulted in violence, loss of life or limb and destruction of property. Kashmiris dreaded the sight of an Indian soldier. A soldier approaching anyone always meant some trouble ranging from an identity check, possible beating or a visit to a camp or to obey them whatever they say, “A soldier stopping near you meant trouble. It meant an identity check, a possible beating or a visit to the nearest army camp. Or he might simply order you to carry a bag of supplies to his camp. Soldiers forcing civilians to work for them was common” (48).

Peer has artistically brought to the forefront the horror of the 90s of Kashmir when disappearances and crackdowns became common place there. Crackdowns further aggrieved the miseries of the people. He describes the sufferings of the people during the process of crackdown carried out by the army. In one such incident narrator’s village was surrounded by the Indian security forces. The village was emptied and the inhabitants were ordered to gather in one place. There they were ordered to walk one by one in front of a masked informer. Anyone identified by the informer would be subjected to inhuman terror. A character, Manzoor was interrogated after he was pointed out by an informer. He was subjected to questioning and torture. They mistook him for his links
with militants. Since Manzoor was narrator’s classmate, he himself was subjected to questioning regarding Manzoor to cross check the things told by him:

Over the next few hours we were told to form queues and walk past the mukhbir. If he raised his hand, the soldier pounced upon him and took him away for interrogation. . . . But Manzoor, my neighbour’s sixteen year old son, was taken away for interrogation. . . . then two soldiers came towards us. ‘Is someone called Basharat Peer here? He is ninth class student.’ . . . The anticipation of interrogation is worse than the interrogation. Then suddenly loud cries and shrieks from the rooms next door startled me. Over and over I heard the words ‘Khodayo bachaav’ (Save me, God!) and ‘Nahin pata, sir!’ (I don’t know sir!). They were torturing the men and the boys who were taken away after the mukhbir had pointed them out. (52-53)

In the same vein Shahnaz Bashir, a Young Kashmiri writer and University Professor in an essay, “A Crackdown in Natipora” talks about the miseries caused to the people during crackdown. During a crackdown process, first an announcement would be made ordering men to gather at a mentioned place and after that soldiers would search every house. Those who assembled were made to walk in front of a masked informer and anyone pointed out by the informer was taken into the makeshift torture centre and tortured by soldiers in order to extract information. He writes:

For the identification parade, the people of Natipora were assembled in a plum orchard that belonged to Shamboo Nath, a migrant Kashmiri Pandit. Shivering, people squatted in the middle of the orchard. Everyone was still anticipating a parade. Some had prepared to get whisked away when the mukhbir sitting behind the steering wheel of a Gypsy would honk. (44)

Peer goes on to illustrate the nightmare of 90s that had wrecked the lives in the conflict ridden state to a state of misery. His work becomes all— too reminiscent of the horror of disappearance, torture, killings, and numbstillness that so characterize those lethal years, when the lives of millions had been altered by bloodshed and conflict. Life
in Kashmir became the tale of disappearances. People who were missing were either taken away by Indian security forces on suspicion never to return or killed in fake encounters. Their families mourned, their wives were half widows waiting for the news if they were alive or dead. Some families had given up hope while some were fighting even now. Peer says:

Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by the military, paramilitary, and the police. Newspapers routinely refer to the missing men as ‘disappeared persons, and their waiting wives are ‘half widows’... Many Kashmiris believe the ‘disappeared’ men were killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. Wives of many such men have given up hope and tried to move on. Others are obsessively fighting for justice, hoping their loved ones will return. (131)

Peer through his novel peeps down deep into the quandary showing all sides; of the individuals marred by military and militancy. For the common people in Kashmir, it had been misery and suffering at the hands of both militants and the security. On one side were the militants who exploited the local people to ensure their own safety and to meet their ends and on other side were the forces who through atrocities, identity checks and intrusions, humiliated them leaving them physically and mentally wounded. The common Kashmiris were caught between Indian forces and militants. They were supposed to prove their loyalty to both. They were tortured for the incidents over which they had no control. The militants who claimed to liberate the innocent Kashmiris from the oppressive regime of Indian security ironically were equally responsible for their miserable plight. They were helpless against a sense of impending and sudden peril. Caught in a trap of conflict and terror they had no choice left but to obey them submissively. Narrator narrates an incident in which militants in narrator’s village planned to attack on an army convoy that was to pass through the village road. Villagers did their best to dissuade militants from attacking convoys near their village out of fear of having to bear the brunt of army’s retaliation. They requested Mohiuddin, JKLF man from their village to stop the attack. In spite of villager’s request they remained firm and did not change their mind. Fearing the encounter and its aftermath the villagers packed up
to leave the village. After spending a night in another village, they returned to their village. Peer says:

A small crowd of villagers had gathered around a Tonga and they seemed to be arguing about something. Abu and I looked at each other. ‘God knows what Tonga is up to,’ he sighed. I rushed to find out. Tonga and his cohorts were planning to attack a convoy of Indian troops supposed to pass by our village. The villagers were trying to persuade them against it. They were addressing Tonga by his real name. ‘Mohiuddin sahib, you are our son, you are from our village. You have to stop this attack.’ ‘Mohiuddin sahib, you know what the soldiers do after an attack. Do you want your own village brunt?’ ‘Have you forgotten we have young daughter? Do you want soldiers to barge into our home?’ . . . The villagers gave up after a point. Our village was emptying fast and almost everyone seemed to be running towards, Numbul, the neighbouring village. (42-44)

The disturbed atmosphere of Kashmir made parents to send their children away from valley to save them from death. They felt insecure and sending away their children was the only option left. The elite and rich class sent their children out of the country while the middle and lower class sent their children to other parts of the country.

…when Kashmiri parents found sending their children out of Kashmir as the solution to the problem of keeping them safe during the militancy and away from insurgency, India was choice for the masses. Those who could afford to get them educated abroad sent them overseas but for the middle and the lower middle class, the obvious choice was Indian cities. (Gangahar 88)

Narrator too was sent away from Kashmir to Aligarh Muslim University after he passed matriculation. In Aligarh he studied Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry at a school run by the university and after completing high school education, he joined college to study Political Science, Sociology and English literature. The saga of violence had become endemic to Kashmir and its people, no matter whether they were residing in
Kashmir or elsewhere. The narrator describes the condition of Kashmiri students outside Kashmir during the riots of Babri Masjid incident. He gives a breathtaking account of how “an extremist Hindu mob” named Karsevaks massacred and attacked Muslim students after asking their names and residence. Most of Kashmiri boys gave up their names in order to provide themselves a safe passage home. Nevertheless, it did result in the death of a few Kashmiri boys during the riots. Peer writes:

The karsevaks asked the students their names and places of residence ... he saw frenzied groups of karsevaks calling them ‘Kashmiri Muslim terrorists’ and attacking them with cowbars and daggers . . . karsevaks were pushing the injured students off the running train. . . . Farhat Razak had been stabbed to death, his body found on the railway tracks by the police. (64-65)

During his college days he aspired to write about Kashmir and did not want to pursue his father’s dream. His father wanted him to qualify civil services examination. He decided to be a lawyer, prepare for the civil services and write in his spare time. But after sometime he left law school in University of Delhi and joined as a reporter with a news site. One day after covering Delhi courts for the news portal he returned to the office. There he got to know that his parents nearly missed land mine planted by militants. After talking on phone to his parents in Kashmir he went to see them. His parents had a narrow escape, when an attempt was made by militants on their lives. The land-mine was planted by the militants along a stretch of highway, when they were coming back to their home from a wedding. Later it was revealed that the murderous attack was specifically meant to kill narrator’s father and it was the handiwork of an acquaintance with political ambition. He remarks:

But civil servants like my father, whose job was to look after daily administration, were rarely targeted. Over the new few days, friends and relatives brought pieces of news and the name of the man who had convinced the militants to kill my father. He was a man with political ambition, a man my father and my family had known for a long time. (75)
Peer also assesses the societal mental health of conflict zone victims. He elaborates how suffering and other haunting memories of the conflict left indelible scars on the psychology of victims. Paranoia and depression affected large number of people who lived in terror in Kashmir. After land mine incident his father had stopped travelling to the outskirts. Fear gripped his mind. In another incident younger brother of narrator’s grandfather developed a mental disorder after escaping a militant shooting, “Four years had passed since the militants had come for him. After dinner he wanted water for the anti-depression drugs he took . . . his blue eyes still had a paranoid look about them, as if someone was watching him” (78). The violence and threat to the life due to conflict created psychological disorders among the masses. The most pronounced psychological damage caused was the creation of ‘collective trauma’ by the unrest that had become a part of their life.

After spending some time with his parents, narrator went back to Delhi to resume his job. In the winter of 2001, he was sent to Kashmir on an assignment to report on the situation there. He wrote the story of Afaq Shah, the first suicide bomber. He was a young Kashmiri boy and in 1999 he had blown up an explosive laden car at the gate of the Indian army headquarters in Kashmir. He wrote about the influences that made him a suicide bomber. He had come under the influence of some pan- Islamic militant group, indoctrinated in the idea of jihad (a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty) and he agreed to be a suicide bomber:

The choice of the suicide weapon as an instrument in the hands of the terrorists derives from the fact that it is available and “cheap”, and the damage caused to the morale of the rival population is grave. A suicide attack is, like all other terror attacks in the modern era, primarily meant to provide its perpetrators with maximum media coverage, thus magnifying “a powerful self-image.” (Shay 2)

Apart from this he also visited villages along India-Pakistan border and wrote about it. The cross border shelling had made the life of the people living there miserable. Every time when there was shelling the villagers were made to empty their villages and
sheltered in tents and school buildings in various towns near the border, “A villager, like the other, was telling me how they were tired of the cross-border shelling… They should fight a war now and settle it. We are tired of dying every day…” (84). Border residents in Kashmir got displaced whenever the border was disturbed due to wars, war scares, heavy firing, shelling or even the mobilization of security forces on the border. The peculiarity of the border displacement was that it is temporary but recurring. Borderlanders had been displaced several times— sometimes for few days, sometimes for few months and at times even for years. Displacement, thus, was a part and parcel of the life of the borderlanders as they kept shuttling between their native place and the shanty camps, whenever the border was disturbed or even it was apprehended to be disturbed in the near future. Herded together in camps lacking even the basic amenities the displaced lived in impoverished conditions. In its trail displacement brought horrible consequences for the border people who were accustomed to live an integrated life as most of their life activities revolved around border. The adverse consequences included rupture in socio-cultural life, rise in health hazard, deprivation of educational facilities and essential services like communication and transport, and also loss of identity and a dignified life. M. L. Kak, a writer and journalist also has written in his book, Away From Homeland about the effects of cross-border shelling on the villagers near border areas. He remarks:

They have to migrate to safer places during the war time because it is quite unsafe for them to live in their ancestral houses close to the border where their huts get hit with bullets and mortar shells. . . . It was quite a pathetic scene . . . From the comfort zone the forced migration would compel them to lead difficult time in tented camps, in huts with thatched roof . . . (24-25)

In the meanwhile there was an attack on Parliament in Delhi. It was extremely difficult for common Kashmiris to find an accommodation outside their homeland because they were labeled as terrorists and no hostel or flat owner was ready to rent a room. Narrator too found it difficult to get rented accommodation in Delhi after his turn from home. No one rented him a room and after lot of struggle a frail old Kashmiri
Pandit, Mrs. Kaul allowed him to stay with her. Observing the condition of Kashmiris to rent a room outside Kashmir was so difficult that Peer writes:

They do not understand. All five fingers are not the same. You are a Kashmiri but you are not what they think of you. . . . I was scared of saying I was a Kashmiri . . . Then a property dealer I had met called. ‘I have an old, lonely lady who wants a paying guest.’ . . . I fought my tears; after months of suspicion I was being welcomed and treated with respect. (85-86)

In Delhi he decided to write about Kashmir and its people. Kashmir has not been romanticized throughout the world as have been other troubled nations like Palestine, Sudan, Bosnia, etc. Every time he visited bookstalls of Delhi and New York it gave him a feeling of disgust. He noticed that these bookshops contained books about these troubled nations but stories from Kashmir were absent on the shelves. All the books about the troubled nations felt familiar to him because people of these places have somewhat similar aspirations like Kashmiris. He writes:

There was also a sense of shame that overcame every time I walked into a bookstore. People from almost every conflict zone had told their stories: Palestinians, Israelis, Bosnians, Kurds, Tibetans, Lebanese, East Germans, African, East Timorese, and many more. I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about Kashmiri experience, from the bookshelves, as vividly as the absence of a beloved. (95)

Against his parent’s wishes he left his lucrative job and went back to his homeland. He believed that writing is the best weapon through which he could show his revolt and condemnation against the injustice meted out to the indigenous people of Kashmir. In the following years he met the victims of Kashmir turmoil to gather as much information as possible. He narrates myriad heart-wrenching incidents. In one incident he talks about a seventy year old woman, Noora, whose son was taken away by BSF when he stepped out to play at a nearby cricket ground. After that she never saw her son. She
even, for a few years, struggled to track about his whereabouts by going to every military camp and every politician in a hope that this might help her. He writes:

I happened to meet Noora, a seventy year old woman, in her run-down house near Lal chowk. Her shopkeeper son had stepped out to join his cricket team at the Polo Ground, a nearby cricket ground. Her neighbours saw a few BSF jeeps stop outside their house, near Ghanta Ghar. . . . The paramilitaries grabbed him, pushed him into the back of a jeep, and drove away. He had been missing for eight years . . . ‘For few years, my daughter and I went to every police station, every military camp, every politician we could. Everybody had a ‘No’ for us.’ . . . ‘Many journalists came and interviewed me. Even some angrez came and promised they will write, about my son. But my son has not came back.’ (131-132)

This is not the only incident as he moves on to talk about Parveen’s sixteen year old, speech-impaired son, Javed. He was taken away from his home during a raid by Indian security forces, since then his whereabouts continued to remain unknown. After running from place to place for years she managed to register a case against the army but she got nothing except more struggle. She was offered the pittance of one lakh rupee as compensation but she refused to sell her son. Peer calls her a ‘crusader’ who is fighting cases for disappeared people:

Parveen, whose sixteen years old, speech impaired son, Javed was taken away from their house in 1990 during a raid by the army. A house wife in her forties, she, along with a lawyer, Parvez Imroz, formed the Association of Parents of Disappeared person to campaign and fight cases in the court. . . . The numbers of missing have come down since Parveen began her battle, but the disappearances have not stopped. (132)

The story of Curfewed Night is softly narrated, but it is laden with such powerful images and scenes which moves the reader. Everyone can relate to the range of fears, violence, sufferings, and devastation that characters experience. Peer has very sensitively portrayed misery of a hapless mother who witnessed her son being used by army as a
human bomb. Such horrors were common in Kashmir where young Kashmiri boys were being forced by the army to approach houses in which militants were hiding with grenades in their hands ending in blowing up themselves while their mothers looked on haplessly. In the novel narrator gives a heart-wrenching account of a helpless mother, Shameema who watched her one son being handed an explosive mine and forced to go inside a building where militants were hiding and her courageous attempt to save other son from similar fate. When her sons, Shafi and Bilal were taken by army, she reached the house where the encounter was going on. After seeing Bilal she ran towards him and grabbed him away from the army men. But unfortunately she could not save her other son, Shafi. He was forced to become a human bomb by army.

In the courtyard of the building next to it, she saw the arrested boys. ‘I saw Bilal from a distance but Shafi was missing . . . I ran towards Bilal, grabbed him by an arm and began walking away with him.’ Bilal hugged her and said that the soldiers had sent Shafi inside the militant’s house with a mine in his hands. . . . She shouted at the soldier and grabbed Bilal’s hand. He said, ‘Let me go, mother. They must have already killed Shafi, let me die too . . . ‘Then he ordered the soldiers to let us go. I held Bilal. As we walked away I saw them push an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands.’ That night they did not sleep. She held Bilal in her arms and they cried for Shafi. (168-169)

The novel is full of such barbaric, cruel and non-humanistic actions of state machinery which made the life of people living there traumatic. Conflict altered and shattered the life of every person residing in Kashmir. Every victim of the conflict has his own story to tell. The scars of pain and injury are not visible only on the physical but also the psychological landscape of the Kashmiris. Along with the physical injury, they also suffer from trauma and depression. His only aim of writing this narrative is to give voice to the pain and suffering of the voiceless Kashmiris. He gives a scathing account of Shameema who in order to give psychological comfort to her paranoid son offered him ‘hookah’. He suffered deep psychological pain after the death of his brother, Shafi. Peer says:
A wail rose from the other corner of the verandah. Her thirteen year old son was crying. She hugged and patted him and consoled him by saying I was here to help with Bilal’s job. Then she lit the hookah and gave it to him, as if it was a feeder. He puffed violently and stared at me. Shameema told me he was psychologically disturbed. He had been in the same school as Shafi and would run from his classroom to cry outside the house where Shafi was killed. His condition had worsened and he refused to go to school… But every time Shafi is mentioned, he is agitated. Which mother would pass a hookah to her son? But I have to, it calms him down. (170)

In another incident the narrator talks about a 12th class student, Gulzar who was killed in a fake encounter. One evening army surrounded his house. They searched the house and asked for him. After that he was taken to cowshed where they planted a mine blast. The mine killed him but the army later claimed that he was a militant and he himself blasted the mine, “The soldiers had detonated a mine, which killed Gulzar. They claimed he was a militant and had mistakenly blasted the mine after identifying it” (165).

The narrator is pained to see the Kashmir and its people falling victims to the decades of warfare that has left such indelible scars, both physically and psychologically that is written large on their face and mind. The narrator also talks about how series of horrible rapes and atrocities by Indian forces radicalized hapless population. Women tolerated unduly the costs of wars. They experienced serious violations of human rights in situations of armed conflict, including terrorism, torture, disappearance, rape, ethnic cleansing, and family separation. Additionally, they bore lifelong social and psychological traumas. Women’s experiences of armed conflict in Kashmir were multiple and they may be classified as— vulnerable victims. Women in Kashmir were victims of violence in the hands of both, security forces and the militants. They had been raped, tortured, maimed and killed. The culture of rape, although a universal phenomenon to intimidate and bring women to submission, had an especially devastating effect on the lives of women in particular and the families in general in Kashmir since the inception of insurgency. In Kashmir this concept of coercing a population into submission by raping women had been the easiest and most potent instruments of the security forces and the
militants. The state-sponsored gun in the hands of military and para-military forces led to all sorts of excesses against women, including abusing their chastity. It has now been established that violence against Kashmiri women, especially rape, had been used by security forces as a weapon to impose collective punishment. Rape most often occurred during crackdowns, cordon-and-search operations during which men were held for identification in parks or schoolyards while security forces searched their homes. Hafsa Kanjwal in an article, “Women in Kashmir: A Feminist Autoethnography.”

Women are often the recipients of violence themselves, most prominently sexual violence. A 2005 report by Doctors without Borders noted that Kashmir has some of the highest rates of sexual violence in any conflict region. These abuses against women occur not only by the Indian security forces and paramilitary forces, but also by the members of the various militant groups operating in Kashmir. Ironically, both the militant groups and the Indian security forces posit themselves as the protectors of women against the other. (57-58)

In the novel narrator talks about a couple, Rashid and Mubeena of Chawalgam village who were trying to cope up with the trauma of having their wedding attacked by the soldiers. It was the centuries old tradition in Kashmir that the marriage procession had to leave only after dusk. Though groom, Rashid was apprehensive of the timing of the departure due to fear of military forces. But he had to give in when his elders and relatives convinced him that they had sought permission of army. But they were not aware that their most beautiful night would soon turn into the most horrible nightmare of their lives. On their way back home they were stopped by paramilitary forces that were recently attacked by the militants. They started harassing them. They were frisked and asked about their purpose of traveling. They were beaten and then the bullets were poured on the wedding procession. Five bullets hit the groom, Rashid and bride, Mubeena and her maid was gang raped. After that incident both scared even the sight of a soldier:
Rashid saw two of them grab his brother by the neck and drag him to the roadside, where they began beating him. Rashid was yet to realize what had happened to his cousin, when he was hit in the back; doctors later found five bullets there. Three bullets hit Mubeena in her shoulder, back, and hip. . . . Mubeena stood along with her bridesmaid and others by the roadside. She was bleeding, when a group of soldiers dragged her and the chambermaid to the mustard fields beside the road. An unknown number of BSF men raped the two injured women. ‘I could not even remember how many they were. I lost my senses,’ Mubeena said. (153-154)

Another such moving incident is about the village Kunanposhpura, where India soldiers gang-raped twenty women in 1990. In Kunanposhpura the males were asked to come out of their houses and ordered to gather at a single place. The women of the village were raped by army during the absence of their male counterparts:

I had failed to visit the village of Kunanposhpura, the village in the northern Kupwara district where the Indian army raped more than twenty women in 1990. It had become a symbol, a metaphor, a memory like Srebrenica. In early December, I travelled to Kupwara, three hours from Srinagar. I planned to finally visit Kunanposhpura. (156)

Indian army launched a search operation in the village of Kunanposhpura, just two miles from the main township of Kupwara, and exhibited extreme barbarism by raping almost all the women and girls of the village, including teenage girls and an over eighty year old frail grandmother. The soldiers, in their frenzy to punish and to satisfy their animal egos by inflicting the most heinous of human instincts, were blinded to even target an over eighty year old grandmother, who was but a bundle of bones. The troops first collected all the men in one corner of the village not allowing any of them to enter the houses, and whilst a group of soldiers interrogated and adopted cruel measures to torture the men, others went ahead and mercilessly raped the women, irrespective of their age, marital status, or even pregnancy. Abdul Basit Naik in an article, “Feminine Oppression: A Study of the Conflict in Kashmir” talks about Kunanposhpura tragedy:
In Kunanposhpora, a small village in Kashmir, the soldiers of fourth Rajputana Rifles allegedly raped about 53 women on the unfortunate night of February 23, 1991, during a search operation while men were taken away from their homes and interrogated. The ages of women raped ranged from 13 to 80 years. (165)

Peer has put together different stories weaving a narrative that is a stark portrayal of the lives unnecessarily lost in conflict. As a result of the pathetic situation, the people in the valley were seen more celebrating dead than the joy of newly born. The narrator describes that the graveyards were full and the gardens and meadows were converted into graveyards. The garden and meadows were having several colonies of dead with and without grave stones, with and without names; some of them having only numbers on the grave stones. The mass graves had been identified all over Kashmir. These unmarked graves believed to contain bodies of thousands of Kashmiris of enforced disappearances.

Hundreds lay buried in neat rows, each grave marked with a white, rectangular tombstone with a green border engraved with the names of the dead… And there were unknown men and women from all parts of Kashmir. In a grave, two children— four and five years old— were buried together. Hasan, the old keeper of the graveyard, told us the graves had been dug in anticipation of the brisk death toll in the early nineties. (124)

Narrator also talks about the struggle of the families for the monetary relief whose members got killed in conflict. The families of the innocents who got killed in the conflict had to strive hard for monetary relief. Even bureaucrats demanded huge bribes for sanctioning monetary relief. He did not spare the corrupt bureaucracy by describing the complacency of the valley’s bureaucratic system. He has criticized the red tapism that existed in the government offices. The applicant who had applied for monetary relief had to spend money like twenty five to thirty thousand rupees out of the relief money in order to move the file from one table to another, otherwise he will waste years visiting officers:

Then the cases come here to the relief section in DC office. We have to make the file move.’ He paused to smoke. ‘The file does not move by
itself from one table to another… The senior officers are to be convinced and given their share too. All this takes time and money. Out of the relief money of one lakh, the applicant has to spend 25-30,000 rupees. Otherwise, he will waste years visiting offices. Once he pays that, we ensure that his name in the compensation job list goes up and things move fast.’ He sounded like an automaton. (172-173)

Peer leaves no stone unturned to bring into light the kind of life Kashmiris are living for more than past two decades. The details given by him about the interrogation centres where prisoners were treated worst than the beasts in the cells were horrible and blood- curdling. The description of horrible physical and mental tortures inflicted on the people arrested invoke sympathises to the extent that one condemns the inhuman acts committed by the army investigators. The stories of physical and mental torture inflicted on the victims of the infamous torture centres, Papa 2 and Gogaland, are terrible and pathetic. In these centres and others like it, the detainees were beaten ruthlessly, tortured brutally and made wrecks. The interrogators tied a long wooden ladder to the prisoner and placed him near a ditch filled with kerosene and red chilli powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed the head of a prisoner into the ditch and this continued for an hour or so. They burned arms and legs with cigarette butts and the flames coming from the kerosene stoves. But worst phase of torture was insertion of copper wire into their private parts and giving electric shock. Shock treatment destroyed many lives; many could not marry after that. He writes:

The floor was bare. Smears of blood blemished the whitewashed walls. Every man had a coarse, black blanket for bedding. The blankets were full of lice . . . A corner of the room was their toilet. The prisoners defecated and urinated into polythene bags in a corner; . . . ‘they made u sit on a chair, tied you with ropes. One soldier held your neck, two others pulled your legs in different directions, and three more rolled a heavy concrete roller over your legs. They asked questions and if you didn’t answer, they burnt you with cigarettes.’ . . . But the worst was when they inserted the
copper wire into penis and gave electric shocks. It destroyed many lives. Many could not marry after that. (143)

Fahad Shah in his essay, “Kashmir: A Colony of India” has talked about the tortures meted out to the prisoners in torture cells, “Beatings were routine. Mice were thrown into their trousers, and in some cases they were given petrol injections, which cause intense pain throughout the body” (207). Peer met different victims who were tortured in one interrogation centre or the other to understand their own private struggle in a land torn apart by violent conflict and anguish. They were struggling hard to relive their life again. In “Papa 2” the detainees were beaten so ruthlessly that even innocents accepted that they were militants or helpers of militants. In the novel the very heart breaking episode is that of Shafi, who had spent seven months in “Papa 2” torture centre. He had been exposed to corrosively bright lights and was on the verge of blindness. He narrates:

Throughout night, people woke up shouting, cursing the lice, trying to sleep again, only to be woken up by the next man battling the vermin. Some managed to sleep, though the lights were never switched off. ‘During the interrogation, I was made to stare at very bright bulbs. Even in our room, the light burnt my eyes. I craved darkness.’ Darkness came. ‘I began losing my eyesight there. I can barely see now despite my glasses.’ (140-141)

The sincere, unbiased and faithful heart and mind of the Peer could not tolerate the pain and the sufferings of the Kashmiri Pandits. He was aghast to see the Kashmiri Pandits leaving the valley of Kashmir, with the pangs of sufferings, fractured peace and with haunted memories of their lost paradise. Having lost their homeland they were forced to live in a land alien to them. The life and plight of the lives in exile was horrible. They were living under impoverished conditions with no choice of their own. Such horrible and unbelievable scenario of ruthless sufferings made him to brood over the exilic resonances of Kashmiri Pandits. To narrate misery, helplessness and horrible plight of lives in exile narrator met with them to understand their struggle. He desperately made a search for his Kashmiri Pandits friends. He visited Awtar, an exiled Kashmiri Pandit, in
Jammu to meet his father’s adopted Hindu sister Gauri, wife of Awtar. The description of Pandit woman living in a camp in Jammu was very pathetic. He felt very uncomfortable in the room when he saw the young Kashmiri Pandit girl who wanted to change her clothes but is unable to do so in presence of a stranger due to the lack of space. He also accidentally met Ramesh, a Kashmiri Pandit at the bus stand in Delhi, who helped him in unraveling the inhospitable conditions of migrant camps in Delhi. The accommodation which was spacious for just one person provided shelter for a family of five and six. Apart from this, they experienced hell on the account of harsh weather. He narrates:

Ramesh was a Hindu from Budgam district in central Kashmir. His family had migrated to Delhi in the early nineties. He lived in a slum in south Delhi. I had been there as a reporter. It was a shabby municipal building, which had lain abandoned for years before the Delhi government settled the Kashmiri Pandit migrants there. Tattered curtains, tied with nylon strings to nails in the walls, served as partitions demarcating the space for a dozen or so families living there. The curtain-walled rooms, spacious for one person, sheltered families of five to six. Outside the building, women had erected makeshift kitchens in the courtyard. Stench from the community toilets could not be kept at bay. Ramesh complained about the heat in Delhi. (97)

Santosh Kumar, in an essay “From Home to Camp” also talks about the displacement of Kashmiri Pandits, as one of the stark realities of the Kashmir conflict and the plight of lives in exile. The exodus has changed the lives of Pandits irrevocably in all aspects. He highlights their post-displacement suffering in squalid camps. The camps highlight the sordid tale of their miserable conditions. He writes:

In the initial years hundreds of Kashmiri migrants perished due to inhospitable weather conditions and lack of proper sanitation and other necessary facilities at the camps. The government built one-room tenements… The structures built were not hygienic. Nor were they suitable for the hot climate. There were acute problems of sanitation, water storage, latrines, and so on. (123)
Curfewed Night is an elegiac tribute to Kashmir—the lost and ravaged homeland of author. The notion of a ravished and violent desecration is present throughout the book. Peer mixes terrifying images of innocence and beauty of his homeland which is stained with gore violence and terror. He mixes past and present to reflect or portray the picture of Kashmir then Paradise on earth and now a lost Paradise. This fusion of now and then draws the margin to the centre of the tale experiencing the incidents as narrated in the novel. He writes:

In old pictures, Srinagar is elegant, latticed houses, mosques, and temples admiring each other from the banks of Jhelum... But elegance is granted little space in an age of wars...

Srinagar is also a greeting, an encounter with a confidant one every street. It is not providing contexts and chronologies to my stories and not the details and the meanings... It is talking endlessly about our shared past, not so much the remote historical past, but the recent past—of fairy tale childhood of the eighties and of the horror of the nineties. It was the pull of those memories that had drawn me back to Kashmir and it was this recent past that I wanted to write about. (108, 111)

Kashmir as a country has endured and suffered so much that it appears as a character in the novel. Peer has very dexterously explained the ruins of his homeland. The horrors of region speak for itself in all its miserable detail. It becomes a tale of a place that no longer exists. He presents the torn cityscape image of Kashmir of the nineties in its most devastating moments. He describes profusely wounded Kashmir—its villages burnt down, temples and mosques destroyed, shrines dilapidated and forts demolished. Many religious and spiritual places, resting sites (graves with tombs) of sufi saints, mass prayer enclaves, and many other sites that preserved ancient cultural and civilizational testimony of Kashmir’s rich ancient history targeted by the militants and at times damaged by security forces’ actions as collateral lie in ruins. Such a state of affairs incites feelings of sadness, anger and helpless frustration that in turn triggers the trauma talk in the communities. He gives a pen picture of the devastated Rughnath Mandir in the interior of Srinagar city. The garbage was dumped inside the temple courtyard. The
prayer room of the temple was filled with cobwebs and pigeon shit and the “Hindu deity’s idol” was missing from the podium. The paths and the streets of its cities and villages are immortalized by Peer whose effect arrests the psyche in a kind of shock therapy. It transfixes its reader in time and space and is hooked to sorrow of broken time. Peer writes:

Srinagar is a medieval city dying in a modern war. It is empty streets, locked shops, angry soldiers and boys with stones. It is several thousand military bunkers, four golf courses, and three bookshops . . . It is stopping at sidewalks and traffic lights when the convoys of rulers and their patrons in armoured cars, secured by machine guns, rumble on broken roads. (116)

Peer aligns himself with other poets and writers who wrote with a similar sense of dispossession and political uncertainty. Their writings portray the conflicts of the times they lived in. He names Akhter Mohiuddin, a short story writer of Kashmir and Agha Shahid Ali, a poet with whom he shares an affinity of preoccupations. The works of both these writers are pertinent to time and space which is palpable in their concern for the suffering and tragedy that befell Kashmir and its people since the armed rebellion. Their works are consistently engaged with stories of human sufferings due to arrests, torture, killings, crackdowns, etc. that were rife in Kashmir throughout the period of 90s. Peer too, like these writers registers his faith in the cause of Kashmiris and express his anguish at the cycle of pain, violence and death that has entrapped Kashmir for more than two decades now. Peer’s writing about Kashmir has given its people a new hope and a sense of encouragement that Kashmir issue is important and worth talking about. In Curfewed Night, Peer undoubtedly paints an unbiased image of the plight of people of the valley before the world. It has connected with his native readers at two levels: Kashmiris living in Kashmir and the ones living in exile. His novel has propelled the young generation of Kashmiris towards communicating their tales of pain, torture, mass murders, rapes and the associated humiliation that they have suffered and continue to suffer. He offers a speaking portrayal of Kashmir from the days of love, peace and mutual amity to the recent days of destruction and death. He mourns the devastation that has visited his homeland, Kashmir which was once called the paradise on earth.