

A pawn in the jihadi game

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A real page-turner or just another thriller on the slightly beaten theme of the Kashmir jihad? That was the question playing in my mind as I read the synopsis of *Lashkar* at the back of the book.

There are two distinct parts to this book — one that appeals to the weapon-obsessed, love guns kind of readers and one that gives real substance to the story. However, by combining the two, Mukul has written a story that moves at a breathtaking pace, with all the fast-paced action one could ask for, without losing out on what gives his readers some thought-provoking insights into the human aspects of the Kashmir conflict.

Lashkar revolves around two central figures, and the indelible impact made on their lives by the

war in Kashmir. Iqbal, a young boy from Lucknow, gets taken in by the words of a rabid priest, believing that his path to heaven lies in teaching the “infidel” a lesson. Salim is the calculating general who is driven by a singular goal — the constant harassment and eventual destruction of India. Both have a common driving force — hate, but where Salim has known nothing but hate since 1971, Iqbal had never felt the emotion while growing up in the happy environment of his family. What brings these two completely opposite characters together, and what ultimately makes the desire for Salim’s death Iqbal’s sole mission in life make you want to keep reading this book.

The change in Iqbal — from an earnest boy with a keen mind for mechanics into a cold-blooded and efficient killer — has been

developed convincingly. It makes you experience a certain pain and helplessness for him, to the extent that you feel like reaching into the book and literally strangling all those responsible for ruining promising lives like his. His journey across the border, the gruelling training at the jihadi camps, his first (and only) encounter with Salim, and finally the dangerous crossing of the LoC in the middle of the night to achieve the mission he has trained for, are all steps that go into the making of a true jihadi. But, it all changes in one instant — arrival at his father’s house. The events and reality he is faced with at that moment change him suddenly and violently, and he comes to the hard

LASHKAR

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realisation that he is just a pawn in the hands of people like Salim, not a fighter for some noble cause. His decision, post this realisation, leads to a chilling and single-minded display of ruthlessness, where the killing machine turns on its creator.

Across the border, Salim’s hate — born out of what he perceived to

be an utter humiliation of Pakistan and its army by India in the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971 — is driving him relentlessly to wage the proxy war on the “kafir”, to inflict damage on innocent victims, all for revenge. As the mastermind behind the terrorist activity organised by the ISI in the Kashmir valley, spreading across India, Salim’s utter disdain for India comes across in his selection of targets — shoppers on the eve of Diwali and Id in Delhi’s busiest shopping centre. It manifests itself in recruiting wide-eyed boys from India to fight his war for him, sending them to what he knows is certain death, either at the hands of the Indian armed forces, or, more ruthlessly, at their

own hands.

Interwoven with this gripping human drama, a war is also being fought using the latest and quite simply mind-boggling technology. The description of tactics used by the army, special forces, and the politics at play, show a very detailed and keen grasp of the realities of war by the author. It can, however, get a bit tedious for readers, who may be fascinated by the war itself but maybe not by the techniques of warfare and weaponry.

The actions of the clandestine counter-terrorist special forces, Force 22, provide for a riveting read, without a moment’s pause. There is a hint of Tom Clancy built into the protagonists of Force 22

— highly trained, efficient soldiers, the best at what they do, able to strike and take down the enemy in the middle of their strongholds. The vivid descriptions take you into the action scenes, and very often you feel as if you are really there. The speed is breathtaking and fun, and provides a wonderful parallel to the speed of the human drama taking place alongside it.

That this book should soon be adopted by Bollywood for an action film is almost a given. The treatment of the story can vary widely, depending on the genre of the director whose hands it falls into. However, the fact that a sequel is on the cards is evident in the final pages of the book. For a reader spoilt by today’s era of instant gratification, the climax may be a bit of a spoiler as it leaves you wanting for more.