

Of Exile, Persecution and the Memory of Lost Home

Irfan Mohammad Malik
Assistant Professor English
School of Humanities
Satellite Campus Leh
University of Kashmir

Abstract

Kashmir conflict, which has its roots in the history of the Partition of India, remains a smouldering ember in the hearts of both India and Pakistan as both continue to claim the territory. Kashmiri Muslims, the majority community, wanted either a separate independent state or merger with Pakistan and the struggle for *Azadi* (freedom) took an ugly turn in 1989 with the outbreak of armed insurgency and militancy backed by Pakistan which left behind a plethora of tales of loss, agony, persecution and death. The massive insurgency in the 1990's led to complete rupture in the established social fabric of Kashmir as it resulted in the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their ancestral homeland to the alien lands. This paper proposes to examine how Siddhartha Gigoo fictionalizes the plight, trauma and painful memories of the displaced community in his debut novel *The Garden of Solitude* and how Gigoo's narrative differs from other contemporary Pandit narratives.

Key Words: Kashhmiri Pandit, Exodus, Persecution, Trauma, Homelessness, Memory

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Assistant Professor English

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Since times immemorial Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits were living in peace, harmony, coexistence and religious tolerance. During the turmoil of the Partition of the British Indian Empire communal violence engulfed the entire region; Gandhi saw a 'ray of hope' in Kashmir alone. The Kashmiri Pandits were a miniscule minority yet they enjoyed privileged positions during the autocratic Dogra regime. After Kashmir's 'accession' with India the Dogra regime was dismantled and the privileges enjoyed by the Pandits gradually eroded. This loss of privileges is interpreted by many Pandit narratives as a sort of discrimination against the minority community. While referring to this gradual erosion of Pandit dominance in the valley, the author of *Tiger Ladies* Sudha Koul writes:

“Relieved of the feudal trappings of our monarchy, we resume our lives in our new worlds with some significant changes. Muslims came into prominence everywhere, rapidly gaining control of jobs in proportion to their vast numbers in Kashmir” (Koul 31)

The demographic changes and the increasing number of educated Muslims getting Government jobs became a matter of worry for the Pandits who felt outnumbered and despondent. The armed rebellion which broke out in 1989 widened the gulf between the communities further. With every passing day the plight and agony of Kashmiri Pandits intensified. Kashmiri militants declared them as the enemies of freedom movement and intimidated them to leave the Valley. Some of the prominent Pandits were assassinated which ultimately led to the displacement of the entire community. Former chief of the Indian Intelligence Agency Research Analysis Wing (RAW), A S Dulat in his book *Kashmir Vajpayee Years*, asserts that Kashmiri Pandits comprised most of the Indian Intelligence officers in Kashmir, thus they became the targets of militancy (Dulat 61). It is undisputed that they became targets of militant attacks not because of their faith but because of their affiliation with spy agencies.

In the recent past Kashmiri writers both Muslims and Pandits have begun to reflect on the predicament they are entangled in especially since 1989. The writings from Kashmir struggle to voice the trauma, torment and the loss of Kashmiris both Muslims and Pandits. Siddhartha Gigoo's debut novel *The Garden of Solitude* is a fictional rendering, perhaps the first of its kind, of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits and the plight and trauma of the exiles. The novel tells the story of a Kashmiri young man Sridhar who grapples with violence, exile and self-realization in the midst of the conflict. Sridhar lives in his ancestral home in Srinagar with his parents and grandparents, but his family like all other Pandit families, migrates to

Jammu with an “overwhelming sense of disinclination, leaving behind a rich cultural tradition, their prized possessions, and an exemplary relationship and interaction of peace and harmony with Kashmiri Muslims” (Jalali 213). Mahananju, the protagonist’s grandfather, though reluctant to leave his home, finally yields and crosses Banihal tunnel for the first time in his life. Gigoo reflects at length on the hopelessness and distress of migrating Pandits towards the end of the first part of the novel: Each truck carried a home, and homelessness. Each truck trudged on inexorably; with terror-stricken faces looking pitifully all around (Gigoo 66). On the other hand the exodus of Pandits from the valley torments the majority Muslim community also. Kashmir’s celebrated poet Aga Shahid Ali responds to this tragedy as:

Your history gets in the way of my memory
I am everything you lost. You can’t forgive me.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory (Ali 2000)

The second part of the novel takes us to the chaotic and morbid setting of the migrant camps in Jammu. It reflects at length the sordid, stinking condition of the camps and inhuman existence in which exiles were forced to live. This is how the novel records the painful experiences of migrants in the camp:

The migrants sat all day long on a rocky mound and discussed the affairs of their community. Days were spent sitting and talking about whatever came to their minds; their plight and their sordid condition. Waiting kept them busy. For many it was a lacerating wait. They had not yet realised that this waiting was not to end. They did not know what they were waiting for. This waiting was not for returning to their homes, not for peace in the Valley, but for a new day to dawn and the new evening to descend. They prayed for a day without sunstroke and a night without a snakebite.

The novel speaks of the hopelessness and despair, of distress and the agony of existential and identity crisis. Kashmiri Pandits in migrant camps turned into existential victims who lived the life of insects and worms. Pamposh, a reticent migrant boy who lives in one of the migrant camps represents the predicament of young Pandits living in the refugee camps. Pamposh’s poignant speech in second part of the book sums up the post-migration pathetic condition of Pandits in the migrant camps. He talks about his grandmother who looks “petrified with a sense of desolation” his mother and sister for whom there is no privacy, the narrow room in which they can’t stretch their arms and legs, the unreal smile on his mother’s face, the frozen silence on his grandfather’s face, the biting snakes and insects, and the scorching heat of summers in Jammu. Pamposh’s speech unfolds the most poignant and disturbing part of the narrative:

Every day I lead the life of a centipede. I crawl. I lick. I hide. I sting. I wake up to the fumes of kerosene in the morning and the sting of speeding ants, feeding ravenously on the sugar spilled on the floor of the tent. It feels as if I have never had a morsel of rice for ages. I wake up hungry and go to bed hungry. I lead the life of a centipede, I crawl. All around the camp, there is

stench of human excrement and waste. People wake up in the morning, hungry and muddled. The awakenings are pallid. The water in the water tanker smells foul, and children lie whole day in their own vomit. The quivering smile on my mother's face is false. I want to peel off that false smile from her face, so that she is beautiful once again him....When we are asleep, we cannot even stretch our arms and legs. There are no hangers to hang our clothes on. No cupboards to keep our personal belongings in. We have no portraits of our and goddesses. No pictures of our ancestors. During the day, we hide from the blazing sun. At night we live from one insect bite to another. Centipedes, millipedes and spiders are our companions. We must learn how to live with them. (Gigoo 97-98)

Through Pamposh one feels the pain of exile and homelessness but more than the apparent symptoms the sickening of the mind that such a state of being brings in with itself, where his grandfather wants to smell the urine of his own granddaughter. "We lick the hours that weigh heavy on our half-asleep existence, and tread laboriously into an endless strain of nightmares" (Gigoo 99).

What Pandits were provided in the migrant camps was an appalling accommodation. A group of research investigators categorized the accommodation in the camps as "one room that is used as the living-room-cum-bedroom-study-cum-store for an average family of five members" (Dabla 78). In the dormitory (of a school) the families piled up trunks and hung old Sarees and bedspreads on a clothesline to create separate rooms (Gigoo 78). In a letter to his son Sridhar's father, Lasa writes about the plight of Migrants as:

I met husbands who had lost the love for their wives, and wives who no longer felt the need to hold their husbands' hands. Some couples have not shared an intimate moment ever since they left their homes. Living in the tents has turned them into cold humans. They have forgotten to love, to caress, and to touch. They no longer feel the warmth. They don't wake up to the warm embraces. They live lives devoid of passion, of desire, of craving. They go to bed tired, and wake up exhausted. They huddle in the dusty corners of the tents. (Gigoo 156-57)

Facing the hardships of living in exile, the middle aged men in migrant camps grew old, and the elderly people failed to overcome the psychological trauma. As Gigoo writes, "There were only a handful of old migrants in the camp. Others were dead and many suffered dementia. Memory betrayed them" (202). In an interview, while talking about the traumatic experience of Pandits, Gigoo said: "The trauma of fleeing their houses and the miserable plight in the camps had inflicted upon them a painful affliction. A form of dementia, perhaps! All these people were left with their disparate Islands of memory" (Cerebortion.org).

The exiled Pandits lost all their prized possessions, the only thing they could treasure was the memory of their past. "All we have now are memories of a shared past in which beauty and ugliness are plaited together" (Cerebortion.org). The psychological plight of the exiles is very complex and almost involves every Pandit inhabitant of the tented camps. They left their homes in a confused and indecisive state of mind. Their physical plight is to somehow adjust

themselves to the harsh and troublesome conditions of the migrant camps and psychologically they battle to re-connect the present with the snatched past. The more the consciousness of loss of their past grows, the more their psychological despair intensifies: “The past was too beautiful to be left behind. The past evoked a longing to be re-lived. The past aspired to race past the present and the future. The present was just a crippled memory, a child’s play, a bubble” (70). After migration Sridhar’s grandfather Mahanandju stops shaving his face and looking into the mirror at his reflection. He would say, “I am a man without a reflection” (Gigoo 85). An undying distress swallows him all over. He silently endures the pangs of separation. Like his fellow migrants, Mahanandju lives in his past. “He longed to live life backwards” (Gigoo 85). Mahanandju’s son Lasa, a school teacher by profession, also finds it very hard to come to terms with the cultural pattern and harsh climate of the parched alien land. He fails to afford to forget the land of his heart’s desire. He expresses his helplessness in a letter he writes to his son, “I breathe. That is all. Love seems to have fled from me. Desire has deserted me. I look at my reflection in the mirror. I see an old and tired “me” (Gigoo 156). Sridhar’s nostalgia for his lost home also deepens. The meaninglessness of life and existence occupies his mind and that makes him a wandering soul. His predicament resembles the Kafkaesque syndrome of existential problematic and in search of the meaning of life and to unravel the mysteries behind human existence he travels from the Ghats of Banaras to the solitude and seclusion of the mountains of Ladakh. Weaving together dreams, memory and reality the novel follows Sridhar through his search for identity until he eventually returns to his homeland to seek out stories about ancestry in threat of being lost forever. Sridhar finds a purpose in his living that is *The Book of Ancestors!*

The novel is partly autobiographical as many of the incidents in the novel are based on real events. Sridhar has shades of Gigoo in him. Both Sridhar and his creator share love for writing stories and poems. They both are idealists and share a similar approach viz-aviz the nuances and niceties of life; yet their experiences vary as Siddhartha Gigoo never stayed in any of the migrant camps: “The *Garden of Solitude* told a story. Much of the story was my own” (NAW). After reading the story many Kashmiri Pandits found their “own reflections in the story” as they were entangled in a similar predicament.

One of the major thematic concerns of Pandit writings post-exodus is the loss of home. The Pandit home has been portrayed as a site of cultural and religious activity—a sanctified space of intimacy and intellectual engagements. There is a reiterated reference to the presence of books in and around the house which symbolize the intellectual achievement of the Pandit community. “Sridhar’s room was full of books, and his writing desk was so organised that he never invited any of his friends and classmates home for fear of disturbing the harmony of his belongings” (Gigoo 8). The outbreak of armed insurgency ravaged this sanctified space. In Rahul Pandita’s memoir *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, the narrative evokes grief and pathos as the protagonist’s mother, now languishing in a makeshift tenement in Jammu, repeatedly talks about the spacious house with twenty two rooms which she owned in the past.

One of the significant aspects of Siddhartha Gigoo’s narrative is that it strives to transcend the general historical/political discourses on Kashmir and emphatically reflects on the agony, plight and trauma of the displaced community, yet it does occasionally refer to the communal skirmishes: “Pandits were living on borrowed time. This had to happen one day.

There was no trust between the Pandits and the Muslims; only pretence. Exile has been our destiny...” (Gigoo 89). Gigoo employs the memories of persecution very eloquently. The protagonist Sridhar says, “If we return, will it be forever this time or to migrate again in some years? One migration after another; there must be an end to this cycle. Let this be the last migration. Let us find new roots elsewhere” (Gigoo 126). Towards the end of the novel Sridhar comes back to Kashmir and visits his home and his homeland as a tourist. The novel ends with the release of *The Book of Ancestors*. Gigoo leaves the book open ended. Like everyone else the author is not sure whether Pandits will return to their homeland—“the Garden of their Solitude” (Kher).

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