

THE PLIGHT OF KASHMIRI PANDITS BEYOND CONFLICTING POLITICAL NARRATIVES IN SIDDHARTHA GIGOO'S *THE GARDEN OF SOLITUDE*

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ABSTRACT

*The massive onslaught of insurgency in 1989 affected almost every walk of life in Kashmir. In its very beginning, the armed insurgency jolted the venerable bond of peace and harmony between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits. The growing fear and insecurity forced Kashmiri Pandits to leave their homes for safety and survival. Their long cherished dream to return to their homeland could not materialize all these years. Over the years, this displaced community has produced a burgeoning generation of writers. These writers have successfully fictionalized and still continue to fictionalize the agonizing memories of past, of rootlessness, of identity crisis of their community, scattered around the country and outside the country. In this paper, we shall work out how one such writer, Siddhartha Gigoo, fictionalizes the same agonized memories of his displaced community in his debut novel *The Garden of Solitude*. In the paper, we shall study the plight and agony of Kashmiri Pandit migrants on two levels; physical and psychological. Besides, the paper will also explore how Gigoo transcends beyond the confines of dominant political narratives (these narratives were politically motivated and formulated with national interests in mind. The motive of these contending narratives was to disrupt the Pandit-Muslim harmony) and hence Gigoo centers his narrative on the lived experience of a common man. Gigoo purposely excludes the convoluted political controversies and instead highlights the harm done by the same to a religious minority.*

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, Migration, Narrative, *The Garden of Solitude*, Psychology, Memory

It is seldom disputed that the Pandits and Muslims of the verdant vale of Kashmir are not only the descendants of a common cultural heritage but also the people, the calm and composed and peaceful living-together of whom even during the most crucial and decisive phases in Indian political history, there are extraordinary examples of communal harmony. They lived together beyond the barriers of religion and ideology when communalism, a holocaust of violence terribly incited and escalated by the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 had murderously blinded the Hindu and Muslim subjects of India. When truckloads of dead bodies were traded in other parts of the country, not even a single death was reported from Kashmir despite the Muslim population being high. As Hashim Qureshi observes, “There is hardly any substantial historical evidence to prove that in a complex society [Kashmir] people belonging to majority religious group compassed extirpation or decimation of a minority group” (231). This historic harmony became victim of the worsening political crisis in India in the second half of the twentieth century. The intrusion of a seemingly indefatigable number of Indian troops in the valley and the terrible eventuality of militant insurgency in late 1980s brought about a tragic end to this harmonious, unruffled and peaceful history of the Pandits and Muslims of Kashmir. The proxy war between the neighboring countries India and Pakistan, the rebelling Kashmiri militants with backing from Pakistan and Kashmir, the regular protests for freedom by the local belligerent mobs and the increasing number of the deaths and disappearances led to a growing sense of insecurity among Kashmiri Pandits. The militants declared them as the enemies of Kashmiri freedom movement and the ‘spies’ and ‘agents’ of India. The militants intimidated them to vacate the valley by using Mosque loudspeakers and by pasting death warnings on poles and walls everywhere. Some of the Pandits who initially resisted the provocations were killed. The growing fear and insecurity led to a mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits to Jammu and various other parts of the country in the beginning years of the troubled 1990s. The story of irreparable loss, suffering and distress, both physical and psychological, of Kashmiri Pandits begins with the migration. Their broken memories of the past, their unflinching yearnings to return to their homeland, their helplessness while living a sub-human life in squalid migrant camps, their tormenting sense of uprootedness and their endless strivings to settle in alien socio-cultural and linguistic settings, are remarkably captured by a new burgeoning and promising generation of Pandit writers. Siddhartha Gigoo, a prominent Kashmiri Pandit writer, who artistically assesses this historical phenomenon of migration and its impact on the physical and psychological health of Pandits in his debut novel *The Garden of Solitude*.

Gigoo’s *The Garden of Solitude* mainly focuses on the travails of a Pandit family, its painful departure and its endless sufferings in despicable and shabbily cluttered migrant camps in Jammu. While undermining the dominant conflicting political ‘grand-narratives’ or ‘totalizing explanations’ of the time that “attempt to systematize and control the

whole discourse”, Gigoo centers his narrative on a common man’s lived experience in a situation where he is shattered, uprooted, hopeless and perennially tortured (Jerome 110). After the killing of several Pandits by militants, the objective of which was “to dramatize the ascendancy of subversive and to create a fearful atmosphere for Kashmiri Pandits”, Mahanandju’s 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). Towards the end of the first part of the novel Gigoo explains the plight of the helpless and defeated migrating families thus:

Each truck carried a home, and homelessness. Each truck trudged on inexorably; with terror-stricken faces looking pitifully all around....A sense of homelessness ignited their hearts with love for each other. A sense of loss made them embrace each other and seek solace in grief. Each one had a story to narrate. (66)

Last three of the total four parts of the book highlight the post-migration miserable life of the Pandits. Based on the experiences of Mahanandju, Lasa and his son Sridar and their heart-sickening interactions with the fellow inhabitants of the dingy tented camps, the plight of Pandits can be studied on two levels; physical and psychological. The physical plight begins with the very assassination of some of the prominent Kashmiri Pandits even before the mass-migration. The way they were forced to leave their homes in overcrowded trucks evokes the pathetic images of the coops of poultry. Mahanandju, in his dotage, travels past the Banihal tunnel for the first time in his life. The major chunk of the displaced Pandits had to live in an omnium-gatherum of dilapidated migrant camps in Jammu. In these camps Pandits silently bore the humiliating hardships. What they were provided in the migrant camps was a shameful accommodation. In some aspects, it was worse than the established slums. A group of research investigators characterized this one-room 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). The inhabitants divided their single room accommodations by piling up trunks and hanging old sarees and bedspreads as walls. They look fatigued and disoriented as they assemble outside the registration centers to get registered (ironically) as the legitimate inhabitants of the moribund migrant camps. A gradual obsolescence and an imperial stillness creep into the displaced community and decimate its very life-blood. Pamposh, a friend of Sridar whom he encounters during one of his visits to explore the condition of his fellow camp inhabitants, is not better than a wreck, tossed up by waves to break into pieces and vanish into nothingness. His poignant speech in second part of the book sums up the post-migration pathetic condition of Pandits in migrant camps. He talks about the stinking puddles of water in which his mother washes the utensils, 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 broiling heat of summers in Jammu. Some parts of his speech evoke some of the most harrowing and worst examples of existential crisis in literature. His speech begins thus: "Every day I lead the life of a centipede. I crawl. I lick. I hide. 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" (97). He continues unabashedly as he talks about the plight of his mother and sister:

They line up for hours in the morning to use the makeshift toilet made of torn shreds of canvas, pieces of cardboard and tin. They await their turn at the filthy and stinking toilets while the loitering men watch the women wait to relieve themselves. Many women prefer to go to the stinking latrines at midnight, away from the stare of men. (98)

One of the most poignant sentences in the novel, with which Pamposh winds up the plight of his family, is also applicable to the general distress of the whole Pandit community. "We lick the hours that weigh heavy on our half-asleep existence, and tread laboriously into an endless strain of nightmares" (Gigoo 99).

After migration, Mahanandju's health begins to deteriorate. Under the colossal weight of the memories of past, his body gradually begins to decay. The Alzheimer's disease eats up his memory and finally kills him. This also stands true to all the elderly Pandits who could not endure the shock of forced displacement and harsh alien surroundings. In this connection, the prominent Kashmiri sociologist Bashir Ahmad Dabla writes:

The people who suffered more in these conditions were old, women, children and disabled-handicapped. The extreme heat in Jammu, even up to 44° C, was not bearable for these categories of people. In actuality, many individuals belonging to these groups suffered/collapsed/died because of dehydration, sun-strokes, skin reactions, neurological disorders, cardiac attacks, snake bites and so on. (81)

In the novel, the physical plight of the Pandit community culminates in the letter written by Lasa to his son Sridar who is in Delhi, wandering from place to place in search of a job. The letter, suffused with an overwhelming despondency, talks about "a strange vacuum" that like a mountain, has not only burdened the soul of Lasa but also the soul of whole Pandit generation. Lasa watches and visits every family in the locality. He experiences a strange physical detachment among the members of almost every family and writes about it to his son and at the same time produces one of the best poignant passages of the novel:

I met husbands who had lost the love for their wives, and wives who no longer felt the need to hold their husband's 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)

The psychological plight, on the other hand, is very complex and almost involves every Pandit inhabitant of the tented camps. Their anxiety and despair, causing a "sickness unto death" develops from the very moment when out-break of militancy in 1989 unleashes the reign of terror and insecurity in Kashmir. They left their homes in a muddled and indecisive state of mind. Their actual psychological battle to belong to a new terrain and to re-connect the present with the snatched past, begins after migration. The more the consciousness of loss of their past grows, the more their psychological despair intensifies. Kierkegaard's philosophy of anxiety comes handy here. He also believes, "the more consciousness [of despair], the more intense the despair" (Watts 179). In first three lines of the second part of novel, Gigoo beautifully points to what psychologically occupies the mind of every Pandit after migration: "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 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). A timeless distress swallows him all over. He is a silent sufferer of the pangs of separation. He is displaced physically, but he lives in his past. An imperious presence of a disjointed absence marks his dotage. "He longed to live life backwards" (Gigoo 85). Mahanandju's son Lasa, a school teacher by profession, also finds it very difficult to reconcile with cultural pattern 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). The Pandits loved their land even more than their fellow Kashmiri Muslims, because they lived there even when Islam had not arrived. Their love and attachment with their land led to a grave psychological disturbance among Pandits after migration:

The Pandits loved their land, perhaps with a greater spiritual commitment than the Muslims, because they were not importers and they had lived in the valley, generation after generation, over thousands of years. They had a greater sense of belonging, with its roots in the geography of their land. They were no conquerors; they had risen from their soil. (Teng & Gadoo 82)

In migrant camps, the number of elderly people decreased quickly after migration given to their inability to withstand 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). Nagraj, a well off Kashmiri Pandit writer and Sridar’s friend, cannot do away with the memories of his father who had popularized the rich cultural tradition of *Band Pather*, a form of folk theatre, in Northern Kashmir. Nagraj’s father commits suicide after being forcefully detached from the members of his troupe.

Sridar, a coming-of-age and the most significant character in last two parts of the book, is very much conscious of the psychological plight of his scattered generation. In growing conscious of their plight, he himself suffers. Where ever he goes in the course of the story, he carries the memories of home, his identity, and his roots with him, which always lay buried beneath the overwhelming weight of his helplessness. As is described in the novel: “He did not have any friends and the thought of carrying his loneliness with him in his heart, all through his life, tormented him. His secret desires and yearnings lay buried in his heart” (88). He is so possessed by the confused multitudes of memory that a reader catches him perennially stuck in the mire of undecidability. When Raghav (the guide who guided Sridar through Allahabad and Benaras) questions Sridar about the presence of any river near his house, he expresses his mind, possessed by the memories of ‘being and nothingness’ thus, “I left my river far behind at a place which was once my home. The river is somebody else’s now” (141). Sridar travels from Delhi to Allahabad to Benaras to Ladakh to Denver in America, but his heart and mind always stay back at home in Kashmir. His strong yearning to be a writer and record the suffering of a generation dangling between “nothingness and forgetfulness” and “loneliness and neglect” does not alleviate the drama of his own psychological unrest (Gigoo 208). His home coming towards the end of the novel only escalates his yearnings. He wants the time to stop to eternity as he looks on the walls of his house (inhabited by Muslims now) after eighteen long years of displacement. We learn about his ceaseless psychological undecidability when he reads some passages from his new book *The book of Ancestors*. His psychological unease is applicable to all Kashmiri Pandits who still live scattered around the globe and long for their ‘home’. Sridar’s book emphasizes this longing and permanent psychological distress thus, “what did I want to do with my grandfather’s possessions? Discard them, keep them in a trunk for unknown posterity, dust them once a year and forget them afterwards!” (Gigoo 243)

Another significant aspect of the novel is its escape from the convoluted historical-cum-political narratives based on the exodus of Kashmiri Pandit community and its focus on human experience in a given situation. Siddhartha Gigoo would have developed yet another obscure narrative, had he taken the contending political narratives as the central motif of his book. These narratives have unfortunately led to the birth of an equally ambiguous political

consciousness among Kashmiri Muslims and displaced Kashmiri Pandits. Gigoo excludes this consciousness and mainly focuses on the hard times of a scattered community. Linda Hutcheon's quote of Hayden White needs a mention here;

One of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature is its underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which is modern art's peculiar purpose to disclose. (Hutcheon 88)

Gigoo's stand interestingly conforms to the postmodern views [views about literature, art and history] of Fredric Jameson and Hayden White who believe that "there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of genuine historicity" (Hutcheon 89). Gigoo points to this in the discussion, involving Sridar and friends in Kashmir towards the close of the text. The friends are Faud, Sridar, Gowhar and Nagraj. When Gowhar talks about certain contesting narratives related to militancy, human rights violations and Pandit exodus, Nagraj answers him beautifully, "There will always be many points of view. Not one of them is true" (Gigoo 233). In this way, by focusing on the lived human experience, Gigoo creates a more relevant narrative that could have been otherwise lost in the darkness of history.

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