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'HOME-LESS' HOMELAND: KASHMIRI PANDITS IN SEARCH OF 'LOST HOMES'

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When various Literary Theories started its invasion in the academic domain, with both its thesis and antithesis, it heralded a new era where the cocoon of 'a' homogenous monochromatic 'identity' was spilled open with a 'big bang' to decentralize the notion of 'identity' with a very complex intertwining matrix of 'identities'. Metanarratives became incredulous as *petit –recit* became celebratory. Homogeneity was questioned and deconstructed to welcome heterogeneity in its place because "human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions" (Rushdie 12). Notion of identity thus became multilayered and multifarious rather than being single and unilinear. Homie Bhabha, therefore, rightly pointed out in his introductory chapter of the book *The Location of Culture* that:

> The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions --- of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation --- that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. (2)

The canvas of identity was thus redefined to accommodate a wide "spectrum of identities" because:

> In our normal lives we see ourselves as members of a variety of groups – we belong to all of them. A person's citizenship, residence, geographic origin, gender, class, politics, profession, employment, food habits, sports interests, taste in music, social commitments etc., make us members of a variety of groups. (Sen 5)

And it is due to this enigmatic spectrum of 'identities' that one grapples with complex questions such as**:** Who defines our identity? Do we ourselves define it or is it the society at large which defines our identity? At any given moment, while defining one's identity without any set paradigm, what are those perspective that one likes to choose and include while defining identity? Now, coming to the question of choice of selecting some fragments of identity in preference to the others, the question that arises is, whether the selection is natural or is it motivated and controlled by hegemonic ideological discourse of the period? For

example, in a world, which has witnessed much trauma of "ethnic cleansing" and where people have been made homeless in one's own homeland – like the Kashmiri Pandits of India – in that case how is ethnic identity related to national identity? Is this relationship hierarchically structured, such that the 'national' is supposed to subsume and transcend 'ethnic' identity, or will this relationship between ethnic and national identity produce a hyphenated identity, such as Kashmiri-Pandits, South-Indian Brahmin, Bengali-Muslim, North Indian – Jat, and so forth, where the hyphen marks a dialogic and non-hierarchic conjuncture, a non-viable difference that is experimentally authentic but not deserving hegemony? What if identity is exclusively ethnic and not national at all? Could such an identity survive and be legitimate?

Now since the question of both legitimacy and survival of exclusive ethnic identity needs a wider spaceo-temporal canvas for its discussion, this paper would like to narrow down its focus on 'the struggle' and need for survival--- both biological and cultural --- of such an ethnic race--- the Kashmiri Pandits--- as depicted by Rahul Pandita in his memoir *"Our Moon Has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits"*.

Born in the Kashmir Valley, Rahul Pandita, the critically claimed journalist and novelist, became a refugee in his own country, at the age of fourteen, when on 19th January, 1990 his family along with thousands of other Kashmiri Pandits were forced into exile because of their ethnic identity of being Kashmiri Pandits. Two decades have passed, but **:**

> No campaigns were ever run for us; no fellowship or grants given for research on our exodus [...] It has become unfashionable to speak about us, or raise the issue of our exodus. But I have made it my mission to talk about the 'other story' of Kashmir. (Pandita 220)

Initially, Pandita didn't care when a series of untruths were spoken so many times, over the years, regarding the narrative of what led to the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the valley, but then he became "determined [...] that my memory must come in the way of this untrue history"(Pandita 220) because "literature can, and perhaps must, give the lie to official facts" (Rushdie 14). Rightly did Rushdie point out that:

> [...] redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it. And particularly at times when the State takes reality into its own hands, and sets about distorting it, altering the past to fit its present needs, then the making of alternative realities of art, including *novel of memory*, becomes politicized [...] Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, politician's version of truth. (Rushdie 14)

So it is an honest endeavour on part of the author to document a 'true' 'history/his-story' through the sufferings that he has lived and is still living along with so many other members of 'his – community.' The author also categorically emphasizes about his narrative being the 'other story' of Kashmir because he wants to convey the message that it was violence against

their ethnic identity, which made them so conscious of their minority status in a predominantly Muslim state and thus they are the significant 'other' **:**

> A few years earlier, in our locality, a few Pandit families had tried to construct a small temple out of wooden planks [...] But as soon as the planks were assembled and the idols placed on a small, wooden platform, some Muslim men gathered and began to hurl abuses. One of them brought the whole structure down with a kick. There was no protest. We had learnt to live that way. Whenever things went sour, we would just lower our heads and walk away. Or stay at home, till all things got better [...] and I soon forgot about the incident [...] But I think it changed me a little, *and I became conscious of my identity as a Kashmiri Pandit*. (Pandita 35-37)

So it was violence against his ethnic identity that made him "conscious" of the fact that what it means to be a Kashmiri Pandit. And from there in perhaps grew the urge to protect this identity meaningfully, because:

Thus, the endeavour to write down the "insider's" version of the story of "his – people" :

> Like the tramp in Naipaul's *In a Free State*, I have reduced my life to names and numbers. I have memorized the name of every Pandit killed during those dark days, and the circumstances in which he or she was killed. I have memorized the number of people killed in each district. I have memorized how many of us were registered as refugees in Jammu and elsewhere.(Pandita 220)

But though ethnic identity is community bound and pivoted around the socio – cultural milieu, it is perhaps the 'home', the people of the home, their acquaintance and the various other affairs and customs of the home which initiates and propagates this ethnic identity silently even when one is not conscious of it .It is in home that one is born and thus unconsciously inherit that ethnic identity, and it is society who makes one conscious of that ethnic identity by differentiating one from other by following some set of hegemonic paradigm. And maybe it is due to this fact that 'home' remains the central axis along which the various orientation of identity revolves. Home is not just the physical geographical space, it is the 'psychic womb' of every individual --- that physical entity on earth where one feels most secured and connected, a place which evokes the feeling of rootedness, a place to relish one's being, a place where the most beautiful relations of one's life bloom. Thus, 'home' is always mottled with 'memory and desire'.

But, when suddenly one – night, one is forced out of his/her home in the name of ethnic cleansing, how does the individual of those family negotiate with this reality? Rahul Pandita's memoir, narrates the struggle of such dislocated people, who became homeless in their own homeland**:**

> For me, [...] exile is permanent. Homelessness is permanent. I am uprooted in my mind. There is nothing I can do about it. My idea

> of home is too perfect. My idea of love is too perfect. And home and love are too interwined. I am like my grandfather, who never left his village his whole life. It was deeply embedded in his matrix, too perfect to be replicated elsewhere.(Pandita 224)

Truly enough, perhaps a man can reside in multiple houses, but 'live' in one and only one home in one's lifetime. Like Rushdie he too feels that "it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 9). Thus, even after several years of exile, when Rahul Pandita would regularly visit Kashmir as a journalist from Delhi – where he now owns a flat and lives with his family – would never have the courage to visit his home, maybe because he did not want to face the harrowing reality that would shatter the "too perfect"(Pandita 224) image of what Rushdie calls "Imaginary homelands". But, perhaps, the call of 'home' for an exile is too strong to resist **:**

> Over the past decade I have visited Kashmir regularly as a journalist. [...] But in all these years I have never gathered the courage to visit my home in Srinagar. In fact, I would avoid travelling in that general direction. But over the last few years, the urge became powerful, as if it were my compulsory pilgrimage to Mecca. As if some umbilical cord with memory would be severed if I did not visit. [...] So on the morning of a day in September 2007, [...] my journey towards home began. (Pandita 212-213)

In his journey back to home, he was accompanied by two journalist friends, Suhail and Zubair along with the elderly Kashmiri driver, Ali Mohammed, whom he had met during his reporting assignments and over several assignments grew fond of each other. Ali Mohammed reminded him of 'Totha' – his maternal grandfather's brother, who always pampered them during their childhood days – a person who was very close to his heart. And like Totha, Ali Mohammed – whom he calls 'Chacha' – became a very good friend:

> Whenever I went to Kashmir, I always made it a point to visit the Kshir Bhawani temple. There, I felt connected to my ancestors. A day before, I would tell chacha about my plans. He would arrive early in the morning, and together we would drive to the temple. 'It is important to be in touch with one's roots,' he would tell me. [...] On many afternoons, he would park the car outside Ahdoo's restaurant and we would sit like old friends, sharing a quintessential Kashmiri meal of rice, roganjosh and collard greens. (Pandita 213)

Significantly or coincidentally, on January 1990, it was the Muslim extremist, who drove him along with his family away from home and several years later, it is a Muslim driver, who is driving him back home...

On reaching the street of his locality, he walks ahead with Suhail and Zubair following him in search of his home **:**

> *I am now standing at one end of my street, my locality*. [...] *I walk ahead. Suhail and Zubair follow me.* My house should be

> somewhere here. Yes, yes, it is. On my left. I turn. It is in front
> of me. The huge blue gate is still there. The name Aabshar –
> waterfall – is still painted on a small board. [...]
> [...] Then I am standing right in front of my house
> [...] I want to go inside my house, my home, my only home
> (Pandita 214)

But, 'his home' is now someone else's house and now he will have to knock at "his own door, finding someone else opening it, and then seeking permission to enter his own house." (Pandita 216). The very thought is so pathetically disturbing, but the Kashmiri Pandits lived through these!

With every step towards 'his home', the minute details of 'his home' bubbled up from his memory and all those little details of this house – which made it a home for him and his family – were now used by him as a yardstick to judge the difference between memories of past and realities of present: at the very first sight of the house, he could 'still' find the huge blue gate and the name Aabshar painted on a small board, but he could not find the apple tree on his orchard. While entering his home, he 'still' found the fish – shaped doorbell (though non – functional now), but in the living room he could not find the "show piece almari". In the attic upstairs, there were no books in the self where it used to be, but rather the self is filled with onions and garlic now! "There is no kitchen garden – there is no mountain mint, there are no rose shrubs." (Pandita 217) He still wanted to go to the attic and check if something is left of his huge collection of comics and Enid Blyton series, many of which he won by collecting lucky coupons from packs of Double Yum chewing gum. He also wanted to check if **:**

> There is also the 'best deodar wood' that Father had procured
> just before we had to leave. (Pandita 218)

So the picture perfect memory of 'his home' lured him into its magical trail of inspection and "[t]he shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were *remains*; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities" (Rushdie 12). He like Rushdie, realized that:

> Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas,
> childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks,
> old films, small victories, people hated, people loved;
> perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is
> constructed from such inadequate materials that we
> defend it so fiercely, even to the death. (Rushdie 12)

Thus, while revisiting his 'lost home', Panditya was frantically trying to hold on to all those past memories that were once the integral reality of his life.

But the questioning stare of the lady and the restlessness of the man – the new occupants of 'his home' – made him realize that he is the 'unwanted guest' in 'his home' or 'their house'. So to relieve them of this discomfiture he declared very emphatically (sometimes when we utter something against our heart, we try to sound loud and emphatic, in

order to hide our inner turmoil, and perhaps that's why,the author too adopts this means, and thus records this entire speech in capital letters) **:**

> I JUST CAME TO TAKE A LOOK. IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE WE LIVED HERE. WE LIVE IN DELHI NOW. WE HAVE OUR OWN HOUSE. WE ARE SETTLED THERE(Yes, settled!) I JUST WANT TO CLICK A FEW PICTURES AND SHOW THEM TO MY PARENTS. THEY HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO RETURN SINCE 1990. [...] YES, DON'T WORRY, I KNOW HOW IT FEELS – THE THOUGHT OF SOMEONE COMING AND CLAIMING YOUR HOUSE. IT IS YOUR HOUSE NOW. I HAVE JUST COME TO PLACE IT IN MY MEMORY. (Pandita 216)

Thus, it is through memory and photographs that the exiles tries to rationally negotiate the loss of a 'home' : "I have no home, only images. And in those closets in my bedroom, I could only conjure up images of home"(Pandita 224). But emotionally perhaps that is not feasible. So, when the man said "The house was in bad condition [...] when we shifted [...] " he almost wanted to burst out, but said nothing. But in his mind he said **:**

> *Sir, quote a price and I will buy it from you right away. Bad condition! Do you, sir, even realize what it means for me to be sitting in this house? This house built with my father's Provident Fund savings and my mother's bridal jewellery; this house where my mother sat on her haunches and mopped the long, red – cemented corridor each morning; the house we left forever to become refugees and court suffering and homelessness.*(Pandita 216-217)

At such a juncture of life, he would perhaps be reminded of Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" **:**

> How does it feel
> To be without a home
> Like a complete unknown
> Like a rolling stone. (Web)

Yes, the Kashmiri Pandits life became a 'rolling stone' after that fateful night of 19th January, 1990. Being uprooted from home, they were all permanently rooted in the quagmire of dislocation and thus with every passing day, a life of dignity slipped away from them **:**

> Each day we leave behind something of our identity. (Pandita 250)

The process of exodus took away the physical belongings of life and the life after exodus in refugee camps and resettlement colonies took the psychic life away from them **:**

> Every memory comes back to me. The boys who had assembled on the street below on that cold evening in 1990, distributing our houses among themselves; that taxi ride to Jammu and that man showing us his fist and wishing us death; truck after truck refugees under that tarpaulin, that women's blank eyes; the heat and

> other horrors of those one- room dwellings; mother's tears and
> that young man holding the remains of a wedding feast on a plate
> outside our room; the humiliation of a door-less toilet; the
> ignominy of suffering landlords. (Pandita 217)

Thus , many a times , Rahul Pandita compared the life of Kashmiri Pandits with that of the Jewish Holocaust victims **:**

> In truck after truck, there were Pandit families escaping to Jammu
> [...] Women had been herded like cattle into the backs of the trucks.
> [...] In one of the trucks, a women lifted a tarpaulin sheet covering
> the back and peered outside. There was nothing peculiar about her
> except the blankness in her eyes. They were like a void that sucked
> you in. Years later, I saw a picture of a Jewish prisoner in
> Auschwitz. When I saw his eyes, my mind was immediately
> transported to that day, and I was reminded of that look in that
> woman's eyes. (Pandita 98)

The ironic tragedy of the Kashmiri Pandit's life is that in Kashmir they were persecuted and terrorized to leave their home by the pro – Pakistan Islamist militants, for their belief in Hindusim and for considering India as their nation; while in Jammu when they settled as refugees, they were not welcomed either by the people of their own faith **:**

> Initially, like us, the Jammuities thought our exodus was
> temporary. Though they benefitted economically because
> of us, they developed an antipathy towards us. For them,
> we were outsiders. Within months, invectives had been
> invented for us. The most popular among them was:
> *Haath mein Kangri munh mein chholey*
> *Kahan se aayey Kashmiri loley*
> Kangri in hands, chickpeas in their mouth
> From where did these Kashmiri flaccid penises come?
> [...] This was the mainstream India for us. Our own Hindu
> brothers and sisters who took out a procession every
> Basant Panchami to safeguard Hindu rights were turning
> into our oppressors as well. (Pandita 123)

Thus, the Kashmiri Pandits "were already becoming nobody's people." (Pandita 89)

And what makes this saga of loss much more shocking is the apathy and refusal of the majority of India's intellectual and political leaders "to even acknowledge the suffering of the Pandits"(Pandita 220), let alone act for them. On the contrary **:**

> " [...] the land owned by Pandits is being acquired ostensibly
> "for public purposes" under a deliberate plan to thwart their
> chances of return by "finishing [off] their immovable
> property" [...] Sadly, Government of India that depends on
> state authority for feedback did not try to intervene."(Pandita 133)

So, this is perhaps one of such strategic tools that is used by hegemonic discourse to subsume ethnic identity by national identity.

However much we vaunt aloud about plurality of identities in academic seminars and political meetings, but in reality even the celebration of plural identities is not completely free from the clutches of hegemonic discourse. That's why may be majority of the Kashmiri Pandits who have paid much in their life for their identity do not want to talk about it at all. For example, when Rahul Pandita was struggling to get in touch with people whose family members were killed by militants, to record their stories, "no one really says 'no'. But everyone is evasive."(Pandita 221) One of them, named Vinod Dhar – "the lone survivor of a massacre that claimed twenty – three members from his family and extended family and neighbours"(Pandita 223) – asked Rahul Pandita : "What will it achieve now, speaking of those days ? I am trying to forget it all."(Pandita 222) Then to answer him and to convince him to tell his (Vinodji's) story, Rahul Pandita "quoted Milan Kundera : The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting"(Pandita 223). Vinodji was convinced.

Now let's hope, this clarion call of Rahul Pandita will encourage many more wretched silenced soul to give a voice to their petit recit. Only then, as Pandita says **:**

> May be our story will not come to an end in the next few
> decades. Maybe some of us will still be nicknamed Sartre.
> (Pandita 252)

And with all such hope when Pandita ends his memoir with a promise : " I will come again . I promise there will come a time when I will return permanently"(Pandita 253), let's say 'Amen' for Pandita's secret prayer and also pray that no homeland ever becomes 'home-less' again!

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