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Migration, Memory and an Endless Longing: The Poetry of Migrant Kashmiri Pandits

Basharat Shameem
Lecturer in English Literature
Directorate of Distance Education,
University of Kashmir, Srinagar
basharatbhatku@gmail.com

Abstract

The Hindus of the Muslim majority valley of Kashmir are commonly referred to as Pandits and form its prominent minority community. As a result of the rise of insurgency against the Indian rule in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Pandits faced very troublesome circumstances in which their members were targeted by the Kashmiri militants on the suspicion of being informers. Threats were also issued to the Pandits because of their assumed loyalty towards India. In such circumstances of fear and insecurity which sneaked into their psyche, the Pandit community embarked on an exodus from their motherland. Having been in exile for more than two decades now, many Pandits are taking to poetry and other forms of art to express their profound angst on their life as migrants and a gradual loss of their roots and identity. This poetry is written in many languages like Kashmiri, Hindi, Urdu, and English. However, this paper will focus on the English poetry of some of these migrant Pandits. In their newly found poetic voices, the Pandit artists can be seen yearning for their loss home or paradise while also lamenting on the suffering that the differential experience of exodus has brought for their lives. This paper aims to visit the poetry of some of these poets in how it engages with a variety of experiences that have emanated from the exodus of Pandits and their subsequent life of being migrants.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, Migration, Memory, Longing, Militancy, Exile, Poetry.

Kashmiri Hindus are generally known as Pandits and constitute the prominent minority group in an otherwise largely Muslim majority Kashmir valley. As a result of the rise of militancy against the Indian rule in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Pandits faced a very precarious position. Some of the prominent members of their community were targeted and killed by the

Kashmiri militants, as a result of which, a sense of fear and insecurity sneaked into the psyche of Pandits. In such circumstances, the community had to embark on a mass exodus from their motherland. Having been in exile for more than two decades now, many Pandits are taking to poetry and other forms of art to express their profound angst on their life as migrants and a gradual loss of their communitarian identity. However, in their new found voices, they can be seen yearning for their loss home or paradise while also lamenting on the suffering that the differential experience of exodus brought for their lives. In this paper, we attempt to look at the poetry of some of these poets in how it engages with the multitude of experiences that emanated from the Pandits' exodus and their subsequent life of being migrants.

For centuries, Kashmiri Pandits had lived in valley along with Muslims in a harmonious socio-cultural blend. As G.M.D. Sufi observes in his work, *Kashir: A History of Kashmir*, "the cult of Buddha, the teachings of Vedanta, the mysticism of Islam have one after another found a congenial home in Kashmir" (Sufi 19).The age old traditions of *Kashmiriyat* had long characterized the socio-cultural milieu of Kashmir as it had been an abode of people of varied religious and ethnic affiliations whose shared ways of living evolved a unique identity known as *Kashmiriyat*. In its essence, Kashmiriyat was characterized by the universal values of pluralism and tolerance. In this milieu, it was difficult to differentiate between people on the basis of their religious affiliations. Scholars have often alluded to the "sufi/mystic tradition in Kashmiri poetry" as a case in point of "exemplary tolerance between different sects professing various religions'' (Dhar 44). The personality of Lala Arifa, or, Lala Ded, or, Lalleshwari, as she is commonly known among Kashmiris, is regarded as central to the memory of *Kashmiriyat* as it was through her poetry that the idea received its real essence. Outlining her humanist vision, Lala Ded observes:

> Shiva abides in all that is, everywhere
> Then do not distinguish between a Hindu and Musalman.
> If thou art wise, know thyself
> That is true knowledge of the Lord.
> I gave up falsehood, deceit, untruth,
> I saw the one in all fellow beings, and
> Preached the same doctrine to the mind.
> What then is the inhibition in eating?
> The food offered by a fellow human being? (Lal Ded qtd in Zutshi 22)

Lal Ded's tradition was carried forward by a tradition of mystics or sages through successive centuries. These sages or mystics or sufis are revered by all Kashmiris regardless of their

religious belongings. Sheikhul Aalam, or, Sheikh Nooruddin, or, Nund Reshi (b. 1378), is regarded as Lal Ded's spiritual heir. His personality, revered by both Pandits and Muslims in equal measure, is another figure essential to the memory and meaning of Kashmiriyat. He took the universal ideas of Lal Ded to the realm of perfection. Following the spiritual footsteps of Lal Ded, Sheikh Nooruddin expresses his spiritual yearnings:

> That Lalla of Padamanpore,
> Who had drunk the fill of divine nectar.
> She was undoubtedly an avatar of ours,
> O God! Grant me the same spiritual power. (Nund Reshi qtd in Punjabi 109)

However, the rise of militancy in the late 1980s and early 1990s changed the scenario dramatically; the timeless bondage of love and trust between the two communities had been broken. The Pandits were suddenly overcome with apprehensions of fear and persecution while the Muslims began to harbor suspicion. As Sumantra Bose observes in his work *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to peace*:

> Most of the Kashmir's Pandit minority became the first collateral casualties of the independence war, and the movement's leaders cannot avoid a measure of moral if not actual culpability for their fate. The Pandit flight also exposed a critical flaw embedded in the "independent Kashmir" concept—its complete inability to accommodate the multiple political allegiances regarding sovereignty and citizenship that exist even in the Kashmir Valley (the stronghold of pro-independence sentiment) and even more extensively in IJK as a whole. The Pandits, whose history, culture, ethnicity, and language are the same as the Valley's Muslims, suffered because as a community ultimately loyal to India they could not identify with the "patriotic" anti-India uprising sweeping their home region. (124)

Renowned Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid's poem "Farewell", which he refers to as a "plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit", movingly alludes to this tragic aspect:

> At a certain point I lost track of you.
> You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
> In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
> 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… (25-31)

Lalita Pandit, another Kashmiri-American academician and poet, reveals this aspect in her poem "Anantnag" in these lines:

What of that? Now you are
a stranger, an enemy. (38-39)

Children stare with
suspicion. They have learnt
to hate; they are afraid.
Hollow eyed ghosts
walk the streets. (45-49)

Lalita Pandit also writes about the breakdown of the tragic events of early 1990s in her poem "Azaadi:1989-1995":

You thought Azaadi
Could be courted, wooed and wed
Without shedding blood
You thought it could be made
To become a wife who does not stray:
Never demands a price, a gift, a sacrifice. (73-78)

Ever since their migration from the land of their birth, now almost a quarter of a century ago, Kashmiri Pandits have felt a gradual erosion of their identity coupled with profound sense of rootlessness in which, as Lalita Pandit writes in her poem "Anantnag":

Still, my expatriate feet drag me
back to you.
Evening shadows stare at me
with blind eyes. (32-35)

The breakdown of the armed conflict in Kashmir and the exodus thereafter has been highly crucial to the collective consciousness of Kashmiri Pandits. The thought and intellectual activities have seen a cataclysmic transformation. The Kashmiri Pandits encountered terrible conditions in their forcibly initiated new life as 'migrants' in their own country. It was a time where history seemed to turn its tables on them. Just as the prominent Kashmiri Pandit poet Subhash Kak writes in his poem "Snow in Srinagar" about the assault on the Pandit identity by the forces of oppression:

Who knew then that decades later a terror will come to Srinagar?
and I will be unable to see my home where I was born
where we had played cowries on many new snows.
The terrorists want us to bury our past
forget the deeds of our ancestors.
We are banished because we remember
tales that grandfathers told us
because we remember
our story. (33-41)

They were forced to live a life of misery in the migrant camps in Jammu and other places in wretched conditions in an unfamiliar climate. These pathetic conditions of living in the migrant camps, coupled with the loss of home resulted in the Pandits, especially their elders being overcome by trauma, depression and dementia. Writing specifically about the mental disorders of Algerian refugees, but suggestive of similar victims of other worldwide conflicts, Frantz Fanon observes in his well-known work *The Wretched of the Earth*:

> These disorders take various forms. Sometimes they are visible as states of agitation which sometimes turn into rages; sometimes deep depression and tonic immobility with many attempted suicides; or sometimes finally anxiety states with tears, lamentations, and appeals for mercy. (279)

As various studies have explored, the trauma of migration transfigured most of the elder generation Pandits into a sort of lunacy in which they began to blame everything on migration. Trauma and depression, arising out of Pandits' loss of home and exodus, became emblems of this unfortunate community. Prominent Kashmiri Pandit migrant poet K L Chowdhury writes in his poem "Summer in Exile":

The limbs refuse to carry,
blank goes the mind,
limp and prostrate the body,
the lungs tired,
the heart tardy. (10-14)

Summer, like exile -
a leveler of humanity,
a fellow feeling
of suffering and agony,
a wringing of the sins

like the sweat that pours out
from every pore of the body.
Summer in exile -
a sublimation,
a penance,
a transcendence. (21-31)

In his study of the Pandit migrant life, noted Kashmiri sociologist Bashir Ahmad Dabla observes:

> The people who suffered more in these conditions were old, women, children and disabled-handicapped. The extreme heat in Jammu, even up to 44 degrees Celsius, 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)

These were the new experiences which the Pandits confronted and engaged with a profundity which now finds expression in their literary endeavours. As they come to terms with their new existence of being cultural and spatial migrants, a new current dominates their literary expressions, one which is spurred by a multitude of tragic experiences that they confront. The Pandit migrant poets create images and symbols out of these experiences. Their identity, uncertain of its future, is driven by a fast fading memory. In his poem "Dear Departed Ancestor", Subhash Kak refers to the river Jehlum (Vitasta in Sanskrit) as a symbolic memory:

For while the taps run dry
here in exile,
Vitasta is only a memory (8-10)

All this remembrance or memory has to hold itself in a struggle for hope and one of the ways of charting out this struggle is the realm of poetry. And precisely, this is what the different migrant Pandit poets are aiming to achieve in their poetry. In her seminal work *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow argues:

> Poetry is capable not only of serving as a means for the expression of personal identity or even nationalist sentiment. Poetry, as a part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of a people, is itself an arena of struggle. [It] alongwith other cultural and literary traditions constitute in an important way their means of identifying themselves as a group, as a people, no less than

> a nation, with a historicity of their own and a claim to an autonomous, self-determining role on the contemporary staging grounds of history. (33)

The past, which articulates one's identity, becomes almost indispensable to do away with. It has an all-pervasive presence in the lives of these people. It formulates the present of the people snatched of their homeland and identity. Carlos Fuentes, referring specifically to the Nicaraguan revolution but with implications for the struggles of people throughout the world, "We must go forward, because the present is unjust and insufferable, but we cannot kill the past in doing so, for the past is our identity, and without our identity we are nothing" (Fuentes qtd. in Harlow 82). It is their past which is enabling the Pandits to sustain the continuity with their roots of belonging while also defining their future as they come to terms with repression and dislocation. Memory becomes a central territory in which the present takes refuge as Subhash Kak writes in his poem "The Records of our Lives":

> And if memories don't matter, then how do we define
> ourselves? How is our responsibility
> measured? If our memories are forced
> by those around us, how much of credit
> is theirs? Where is our freedom? (28-32)

It was difficult for the Pandits to delineate their past from their present. For instance, in his poem "Exile", Subhash Kak writes:

> Memories get hazy
> even recounting doesn't help
> I need to look at pictures
> or listen to music to remember
> and sometimes walking through narrow lanes of my town
> a sudden perfume escaping from a window
> halts my steps and I am transported
> to my childhood years. (1-8)

K L Chowdhury also narrates a similar poignant experience in his poem "Keys":

> Even after a decade in exile
> I hang, from my girdle, this bunch of keys,
> keys that I carried with me
> when I was forced to flee,
> keys to my home,
> keys to my relics, my diary, my library,

keys that opened the sanctum
where my gods reside,
all the keys
except the keys to my new destination.
I keep wandering in exile,
carrying these keys
like an albatross. (1-13)

While coming to terms in exile in different parts of the world, the Pandits could still feel the tragic happenings which continued unabated back home in the valley of their birth. As K L Chowdhury writes in his poem "The Curse":

That mighty river of life,
the Vitasta,
now a foul gutter,
her bosom laid bare
and unable to hide the secrets
of broken bones and crooked skeletons
of her once daughters and sons. (9-15)

In his essay "Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness", Amitav Ghosh argues:

> If the twin terrors of insurgency and repression could be said to have engendered any single literary leitmotif, it is surely the narrative of the loss of Paradise. […] [T]he reason why there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy, is […] that this is a grief beyond consolation. (308-313)

The idea of loss becomes the new metaphorical ingredient of this type of poetry. Out of its specific set of circumstances, it tries to develop a new aesthetic out of the elements of a lost joy and the current moments of suffering. The joy of past and loss of present find their expression in these lines of the poem "Exile" by Subhash Kak:

The best paradise
is the paradise we are exiled from. (39-40)

Besides the aforementioned poets, there are many other migrant Pandit poets, writing in various languages, who are sharing and expressing the deep angst of living in exodus, away from the land of their birth. Poetry, like this, throws up new and interesting perspectives with

which we try to redefine literature. Poems like these engage with historical experiences which spur them and hence are no way detached from their immediate realms of reality. In this type of poetry, the notions of aesthetic beauty and objectivity may not become a matter of precedence as it tries to set its own codes and parameters which emanate from various political or ideological terrains of contestation.

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