Exile, Trauma and Resistance: A Critical Study of Siddhartha Gigoo’s The Garden of Solitude
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Synopsis: Exile is a painful experience for human beings and has been written and spoken about in various discourses. Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave their homeland due to the insurgency that broke out in Kashmir in the year 1989. They began to use their words to give an insider’s perspective on the incidents and the pain of living as refugees in their own country. The paper aims to closely analyse Siddhartha Gigoo’s The Garden of Solitude and to probe into how different generations of displaced Kashmiri Pandits try to survive in the hostile situations of exile. The paper will focus on how the traumatic event of displacement has affected people psychologically and how their dreams can be read as early symbols of the collective fear. The paper intends to look at exile not as a passive state of grief and silence but as a space from which people fight against being forgotten and use memory to survive and resist.

Keywords: Exile, Kashmiri Pandits, Memory, Survival, Trauma, Dreams

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history- (Ali 9)

Exile, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is a situation in which people are forced to live outside of their home country, usually for political reasons or as a punishment. The story of human civilization itself is a story of movement from one place to another. But when people are left without a choice but to leave their natural habitat and live in another place, it is traumatic and painful. Forced displacement is not a new phenomenon, and there are ample examples in ancient literature about the identity crisis, tensions, and struggle for survival among displaced people. Ovid who was banished from Rome wrote Ibis, Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto during his days of exile, and Dante wrote his masterpiece, The Divine Comedy during the years he was exiled from Florence.

Kashmir has been a subject of discussion in international discourse for centuries, first for its beauty and later for the conflict surrounding it. During the partition of India, Kashmir was the largest princely state with a Muslim majority ruled by a Hindu king. Kashmiri Pandits are Hindu Brahmins who are natives of Kashmir, and during the
Partition of India, they were a religious minority. Hari Singh, the then ruler of Kashmir didn’t sign the instrument of accession either to India or Pakistan, hoping to rule Kashmir as an independent kingdom. But in the year 1947, when the Pashtun tribe from Pakistan invaded Kashmir, the maharaja approached India for help. India was ready to help and Kashmir signed the instrument of accession to India. Kashmir was given special status according to Article 370 of Indian constitution which was later repealed in the year 2019. Kashmir has been a conflict zone since 1947, but the full-fledged violence and terror was unleashed in 1989. The election which was widely believed to have been rigged and the anti-India sentiments that was sowed by terror groups made Kashmir vulnerable to religious fundamentalism. The seeds of hatred that couldn’t find a nourishing ground because of the idea of Kashmiriyat until then slowly began to flourish. Young men began to cross borders and return back after arms training. Kashmiri pandits who were a religious minority were targeted and they were given warnings to leave Kashmir. But they hoped that the situations would get better until the news about pandits getting murdered began to spread across the valley. With no other way before them they began to leave their homes to Jammu and other parts of India. As a result, Kashmiri community was split between Kashmiri pandits who were forced to leave the valley and Kashmiri Muslims living in the valley under the threat of terrorist attacks.

Even though the popular discourse portrays Kashmir as a place that suddenly turned out to be a conflict zone after 1989 as a result of the insurgency that erupted violently and the struggle between the militants and the Indian military, one shouldn’t subscribe to the belief that Kashmir was a conflict-free zone prior to that. Kashmir has been ruled by different rulers- Hindus, Mughals, Chaks, Sikhs and Dogras before joining the union of India and various religious groups have undergone brutal suppression when the sympathy of the ruler doesn’t lie with their religious affinities. Kashmiri Pandits began to write about their lives as exiles, especially during the first and second decades of twenty first century. Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, Meenakshi Raina, Sudha Kaul, etc. wrote about their experience of pain and alienation as refugees in their own country.

Siddhartha Gigoo is a major Kashmiri pandit writer who went through the painful experience of displacement. His debut novel *The Garden of Solitude* was published in 2011 and traces the life of a young Kashmiri Pandit boy from the serene, calm life in Kashmir to the confused traumatic life as an exile in his own country. His other books include *A Fistful of Earth* (2015), *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exile and Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits* (2015) and *The Lion of Kashmir* (2020). *The Garden of Solitude* though a fiction is closely interwoven with the lived experience of the author himself and as Gigoo asserts in an interview, as a writer he cannot be myopic while writing a novel. The novel depicts not only the painful story of Pandits who were forcibly displaced from Kashmir valley, but it also sheds light on the amicable relationship that the Hindus and Muslims nurtured in Kashmir and how that was disturbed by the religious animosity that was spawned by the sudden political changes in 1989.
Fear ruled the hearts of the Pandits. And they became suspicious of the Muslim neighbors and friends with whom they have shared close bonds for years. The same fear shattered the love Muslims had for the Pandits.

The Pandits became suspects- informers and agents of India

(Gigoo 32)

Sridar, the protagonist of the novel is a young boy. He plays with his friends, roams around and what makes him different from his friends and classmates is his writing skill that has even awed his teachers. The writer portrays the lives of people of Sridar’s village in great detail such as Gani brothers, the gravediggers, Tota, the mentally ill elder daughter of Gulakhar, Nusrat, the younger daughter whom Sridar loved, etc. During Eid, Sridar visits Eidgah, goes to Gani’s house to receive their portion of mutton, and witnesses how women and men around him share their sadness and happiness with each other irrespective of their religion. But this social fabric gets suddenly disturbed when the pro-freedom movements take a violent turn as the demand for azadi became an armed struggle. Though the pandits hoped for the best, the situations deteriorated day by day, and Sridar’s family which includes Sridar, his parents and his grandparents fled Kashmir. Gigoo portrays in great detail the filthy, unhealthy camps and people who struggle for food and basic facilities. Sunstrokes, snakebites, and malaria became common and people especially the youngest and the oldest, suffered the most. Meenakshi Raina, another Kashmiri Pandit writer, describes in detail the inhuman conditions in which Pandits were forced to live in her book The Divine and the Destiny. After completing his schooling in a camp school, Sridar travels to Delhi to pursue his higher education and then to New York as part of his job as a writer for a travel company.

A close analysis of the experiences of the three generations of Sridar’s family makes it clear that each person’s experience varies from the other, and the coping mechanisms that people adopt to survive are also different. The first generation finds it hard to come to terms with the uprootedness, and many resort to mental illness and find escape through delusions. Freud has argued that hallucinations are results of repressed memories entering the consciousness. Mahanandju, Sridar’s grandfather, hallucinates his dead ancestors and gradually succumbs to Alzheimer’s, he stops talking and utters only monosyllabic words. Dina Nath, another old man, waits for Sheikh Abdullah and Triloki Nath, who used to be a rich land owner in Kashmir, believes that his brother has snatched his belongings. Though these delusions are commonly termed as PTSD, the question is whether “post” is a prefix that can be used in these cases where the people are still in traumatic situations where they don’t even get basic needs like food and water. The second generation, which includes Sridar’s parents, views their situation differently, engaging themselves in finding a way to improve things rather than relying on the false hopes offered by politicians.

The Politician addressed the gathering. There was no applause
“You shall return to your homes…”

“When?” a young man got up and shouted.

He kept standing and waited for an answer. There was none

(Gigoo 85)

Gigoo’s characters get an early clue of the upcoming disaster through their dreams and these dreams form part of the collective fear that the Pandit community felt and tried to repress for a long time. Sridar dreams of his own death a few days before the situations turned out to be problematic in Kashmir. Mahanandju dreams of Gani, their neighbour warning him of an impending doom. The second recurring dream that Sridar sees after reaching Delhi is that of a lost book, the title vaguely remembers as *The Book of Ancestors*. Mahanandju’s dream that a dog has bitten Sridar can be read as his psyche’s way of coming into terms with a disaster that has already occurred.

Sridar, who learns that the life of Kashmiri Pandits are slowly being left in a state of forgetfulness both by the media and the government authorities, writes the book of ancestors as a protest against this forgetfulness. Sridar who was a young boy when his family left Kashmir, has a Postmemory that he ventriloquises through his book. Sridar and the third generation like him had only vague memory about the past but it is the stories that their parents and grandparents tell them that connect them to their own past. Sridar goes through newspapers and magazines and could find not even a single article written about Kashmiri Pandits and with a shudder, he realizes that they were about to be a forgotten clan. His journey back to Kashmir and the publication of his book *The Book of Ancestors* becomes an act of reclaiming one’s own past through memory.

“Postmemory” is a term that was first coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe how the future generations remember the trauma their forefathers experienced. This post memory is created through the conversations, stories, artistic works and behaviours of the people. Sridar’s post memory is largely shaped by the behavior of the people around him.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted. (Said 405)

Though exile is a painful experience, it was Edward Said who first formulated the space of exile as a space that gives an intellectual awakening to the exile that results in thoughts that wouldn’t have been possible without a metaphorical homelessness that may or may not be catalysed by physical displacement. In her book, *Edward Said's Concept of Exile: Identity and Cultural Migration in the Middle East*, Rehnuma Sazzad writes about how exile evokes a complex painful phenomenon which paradoxically creates an occasion for profound thoughts. In an interview, Gigoo
speaks about his decision to write *The Garden of Solitude*, asking, “What does art do? It makes us humane… The novel asks an important question: how must we find and know ourselves in the face of adversity and calamity?”. Unlike his parents and grandparents, Sridar reaches a metaphorical exiled state intellectually, where his own status as an exile becomes a principled position and years he spent in Delhi and New York becomes the stagnation stage that he eventually overcomes. The novel ends with Sridar publishing his book, *The Book of Ancestors*. Sridar, from his exiled state, proclaims the politics of a whole community to the world through the publication of his book. Thus, memory becomes Janus-faced for the Kashmiri Pandits in exile; it disturbs them, it is traumatic to them, it is painful for them, but the same memory becomes a way of survival and resistance for them.

Works Cited


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