

The Lost Homeland of Kashmiri Migrant Pandits

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All of us know that since 1989, the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been in the grip of what has been either called a freedom struggle movement or the violent militant movement in Kashmir. More than one lakh people have been killed since its inception and around ninety percent of them are Kashmiri Muslims. In the early nineties, some aboriginal Kashmiri pandits were also killed by militants but that does not mean that Kashmiri pandits have suffered less in this political turmoil. They have suffered equally and had to pay a very heavy price for it in the form of migration or displacement from their roots. The fictional and non fictional works like *Curfewed Night* and *The Collaborator* give us a picture of the suffering, pain, loss of lives, violence, bloodshed and rapes of Kashmiri Muslims. But these two works give us the understanding of half of the reality at the ground level. Sidharth Gigoo's novel *The Garden of Solitude* makes an attempt to understand the other half of the reality, that is the suffering in the form of exile and homelessness which Kashmiri pandits went through from the early 1990s. In fact Sidharth Gigoo tries to give a balanced picture of the suffering of both the communities.

It is not that there were no Kashmiri pandit writers before the movement of Kashmir but this paper attempts to highlight the response of many Kashmiri pandit writers to the enormous suffering that they went through in the aforementioned ways. The present paper tries to highlight the contribution of many pandit poets and novelists, who have written about the theme of pain, exile and homelessness. One of them is the emerging Kashmiri writer Sidharth Gigoo who shot into lime light with the publication of the world famous novel, *The Garden of Solitude*. Sidharth Gigoo is a Kashmiri pandit who migrated from Kashmir during the early 1990s because of the political turmoil and the rise of militancy in Kashmir. *The Garden of Solitude* is his debut novel and deals with the plight of Kashmiri pandits who had to abandon their homes to migrate when the freedom struggle movement started in the valley. During the last two decades both Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits have been mostly mute spectators, but the ice has been broken now in the form of the various writings with which Kashmiris have started their literary campaign. There is a growing awareness among Kashmiris to voice their concerns independent of any alignment either to Indian or any Pakistani point of view. The outcome of this is the three most authentic and accurate pictures of Kashmir and its realities, breaking the campaign of a picture perfect Kashmir immortalised in the still frames over the years. Three debutants (Basharat Peer, Mirza Waheed and Sidharth Gigoo) tell us heart wrenching tales of Kashmiris through the 90s when unrest in the valley escalated. However, as has already been mentioned above, this paper highlights the suffering which Kashmiri pandits have gone through since early 1990s. Stylised as a truthful fiction Sidharth's *The Garden of Solitude*, charts the loss of community that considers itself to be on the brink of extinction. Published by Rupa and Co, the novel is an insightful commentary on the plight of the migration and the loss of the familiar. Sridar the protagonist is living a peaceful life in his ancestral home in Kashmir as a teenager; he loves reading and writing

poetry and short stories. Then all of a sudden militancy erupts and the Kashmiri pandits are given notices to leave their homes and migrate. Although initially, reluctant, Lasa- Sridar's father decides to migrate to Jammu with his family and grandfather namely Mahanandju. The state of Jammu accommodates the migrants in refugee camps; Sridar grows up in these camps and attends a camp school. At completing the school he goes to Delhi and tries to get admission in a film school but luck does not favour him and he decides to take up a part time job with a film maker. In the Delhi migrant camp he befriends Lenin a part time assistant to a film maker, who encourages him to participate in an essay writing competition. Sridar's essay wins a consolation prize of 25000 rupees and a two week stay in Ladakh. After Ladakh, Sridar goes to see his grandfather, who has by now, lost most of his memory. Saddened, he comes back to Delhi and joins a travel and tourism website. He is sent for a one year deputation to America where he starts collecting the stories of exiled pandits. After coming back from America he decides to visit Kashmir and his old family home in which now a Muslim family lives. The novel ends with Sridar's launch of book, *The Book of Ancestors*. So this novel is an eye opener for many who think only Kashmiri Muslims have suffered the hardships. Their point of view is too simplistic and one dimensional in this regard. Gigoo by writing this novel has tried to give the real and authentic picture of the suffering, pain and alienation of Kashmiri Pandits.

The novel starts on a very emotional note in the following manner:

All I dream of now is a garden of solitude,
where I get a morsel of rice in the
morning and a morsel of rice in the evening. (Gigoo 2011: V)

Throughout the book, the author is preoccupied with this solitude or the paradisaic solitude which he and all those who migrated from Kashmir have lost. This book is an attempt to get back that paradise which they have lost. It's a narrative of a Kashmiri pandit's longing for his homeland. While I was reading the book, I felt the pain and suffering which Kashmiri pandits went through, "Every truck carried a home and helplessness" (Gigoo 2011:66). The powerful and emotional narrative of a young Kashmiri pandit about his grandparents, parents, and the pitiful condition of his neighbours startles and captures the attention of everybody and holds it upto the time it is over. There are many people who have experienced this pain who faint and break down while reading it. Those of them who do not know what happened in Kashmir in late 80's and early 90's will simply weep and cry as the book has tremendous emotional appeal and a balanced analysis.

The strength of this book is in its description of the condition that Kashmiri pandits lived in camps. How the older pandits are dying every second and how it makes little difference if their neighbours are now Hindus (Dogras of Jammu), and how they still long for their Muslim neighbours. Despite being very clear in his mind about what he is writing, Gigoo ventures in other regions and in others' courtyards. He peeps into the homes and hearts of his Muslim brethren, visits Ladakh and gets into a discussion with a Panun Kashmir ideologue. And this is where Gigoo makes his way into what we call 'Kashmir problem' without possibly realizing it. He tries hard to do a balancing act, he narrates the agony of an old Kashmiri pandits, and in the same vein he also tries to capture the fear of paramilitary forces under which a young Kashmiri Muslim spends his time. But in this balancing act, in this idea of neutrality he skips questions which lie at the root of the whole issue.

The first half of the novel focuses on the problems and hardships, the exiled pandits have to face in Muthi Migrant Camp Jammu. This is how the novel records the painful experiences of migrants in the camp in which they got shelter:

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 a sunstroke and a night without a snakebite.

Pamposh met Sridar every day after school near an anthill. He wished to demolish the anthill with a spade and to render the snakes homeless, so that no snakebites would take place in the camp.

There was only one question to be asked during the funeral processions that left the camp every day.

‘Snakebite or sunstroke?’

In the coming days Sridar and Pamposh saw many camp dwellers line up, one by one, in the crematorium. Between them breathed words bereft of any meaning! Words! Silence!(Gigoo 2011: 45)

At another place, the novel records the experience of Pamposh in the following way as he is conversing with Sridar:

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. Father spends most of the time playing cards with the other migrants near the highway tea shop. I am a mute spectator to the horrors of the life inside my tent. The air inside is squalid. My grandfather barely speaks. He lost his voice while leaving the village. A young man had shown him a gun as he was returning from a butcher’s shop. He still thinks that the young man is hiding around a corner, with a gun, waiting to scare him. He stopped talking after we crossed the Banihal tunnel. I saw him look sadly at the fading mountains for long, till they disappeared completely, one by one, into his frozen dreams. And he swallowed his fright. Today I cannot hear what he says. His words do not come out of his mouth. 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 gods 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 2011:97-98)

The second half of the novel concentrates on Sridar’s nostalgia for Kashmir while he is working in Delhi. Although, speaking from the technical and literary point of view, the novel may not fulfil the requirements of a classic novel but Gigoo deserves to be condoned on that account as this novel should be read primarily to have an idea of the predicament of the Kashmiri pandits who were forced to abandon their homes and more importantly their homeland. It is pertinent to mention here that Sidharth Gigoo is not the only writer to highlight this theme of exile; rootlessness and alienation, there are other Kashmiri Pandits who have rendered the same themes in their writings, for example, the Kashmiri English poet

who emerged in the 1990s is Subhash Kak, who was born on March 26, 1947 in Srinagar. He writes in both Hindi and Kashmiri. At present he lives in United- States. Kak's *The Secrets of Ishber* gained him wide recognition. The opening poem of this collection: *Exile*, sets the tone for the rest of the collection:

Memories get hazy
Even recounting does not help
I need to look at pictures
Or listen to music to remember (Kak 1996)

And sometimes walking through the narrow lanes of my town
A sudden perfume escaping from a window
Halts my steps and I am transported to my childhood years
What other memories live behind the barred doors... (Kak 1996)

In *Snow in Srinagar*, Kak writes:

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. (Kak 1996)

Lalita Pandit, a professor of English, University of Wisconsin began writing poems about Kashmir when she heard the news that her house in Kulgam in South Kashmir had been burnt down by Kashmiri militants. Here is a famous quote from her collection of poems- *Sukeshi has a Dream* and the poem namely *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. (Pandit 1995)

The other less known Kashmiri pandit is Arjan Dev Majboor who wrote articles on the same theme and in his poetry he wrote about the intrinsic tragedy of Kashmir valley. In an article "Exile was a big jolt for me" written shortly before his death in Jammu, Arjan Dev Majboor, one of the major Kashmiri pandit poets talked at length about the night he left his village in Kashmir with his family in 1989. "It was at 9 p m we left. As the taxi prepared to leave I looked towards my house, the compound and then the starry sky with sorrow," (Majboor 2010) Majboor wrote. He had no illusions about his return to the Valley and had a feeling that this was going to be his last glimpse of his home at Zainapora, the village where many generations of his family had lived in peace and happiness. The article goes on to narrate the entire nightly journey out of the Kashmir Valley, the stopover at Ramban well past midnight, the following search by the security personnel at a bridge and the breakdown of the vehicle at Batote before finally reaching Jammu, their destination. The pain of the journey would later permeate his poetry. Majboor had to wait for 12 long years before he could visit his beloved Valley, followed by a few more until his death two years back. In his 64 page poem *Tyol* (Twinge), Majboor would conjure up a fictional *raj hans* (royal swan) whom he pleads with to fly to his native village in Kashmir and bring the news from there.

The swan reaches a deserted village burned under snow. Only sign of life there is an abandoned new born. But Majboor's poetry is not limited to his personal sense of exile. He wrote about the intrinsic tragedy of the Kashmir valley.

Vanakh na Jafereo ledris Gulabas

Chi Kashir kyazi Sairi Dar Azabas

(You Marigold, would you mind asking the yellow rose

Why Kashmiris of all hues are in such an unending torment?)

(Majboor 1995)

In addition to the above mentioned poets and novelists who talk about the pain of separation of their homeland, there are other poets of standing like Khema Koul, Bimla Raina, S.M Zutshi, H.K Bharti and many others. Around sixty migrants have been writing about it over the past two decades and the longing to return to the valley remains the locus of their imaginative realm. It is through these works that for the first time in history, poetry in Kashmiri language has known the sense of exile. In fact, this exile is not only about the Kashmiri pandits who fled the Valley, but local Kashmiri poets too have given voice to a wrenching sense of loss. Their works betray an abstract sense of distance from their violently transformed surroundings. Kashmir's greatest living poet and Jnanpith award winner Rehman Rahi writes about the state ruled by fear:

Snows melted, winds blew and orchards blossomed

O, spring do affirm that this land too is a witness to better days

And at another place he writes:

Fork tongued dread slithers through the land, smothering us

Even loonies look for cover, in grave and silence. (Quoted by Riyaz Wani)

Kashmiri pandit poets, on the other hand, have suffused the language with an unremitting pain of physical separation. Forced to stay away from their homeland for the past two decades, these poets have held fast to their mother tongue to hang on to their tradition and their land. For them their language is a storehouse of memory and its expansive imaginative realm evokes a parallel Kashmir complete with snow, greenery and gurgling streams. Pandit Prem Nath Shad evokes this boundless sense of loss in his poem *And I Departed*. He poignantly captures the last moments he spent in his central Kashmir village of Yachgam before boarding a truck to Jammu.

I let go of my home and possessions and departed

I left behind a lifetime of companionship and departed

In tearing haste with doors open and latches unfastened I handed over my house keys to God knows whom and departed

Adorned my cow with a wreath of marigolds I gave her a handful of dry fodder and departed

Tethered by seven day old calf to a rope

Kissed it, hardened my heart and departed

Spring chill, early morning squall, ice-cold wind

Fired up my Kangri with twigs of charcoal and departed

(Quoted by Riyaz Wani at Tehelka.com)

Shad, a schoolmaster left his village along with his wife in March 1990 at the break of dawn. His was the only pandit family in his village. "Initially, despite witnessing the pandit families fleeing from the neighbouring villages I stood my ground and refused to leave," Shad said. "But as the situation got worse by the day and I began to fear for the life of my only son, we decided to leave after all. I sent my son and daughter first, tarried a little, wanted to stay back with my wife but couldn't. Kashmir was erupting in every nook and cranny." However Shad vividly remembers the time he left. "Entire village huddled around my house. My Muslim neighbours wanted me to stay but felt helpless in the face of the

swirling turmoil. “Shad said, “Anyways I left. At some distance I looked over my shoulders at my house. I knew I would never return.” Two decades later, Shad is still to accept his new home in the sweltering Jammu. He pines for the Chinar shade of his Kashmir village.

Neither bulbul chirps here, nor dove's cuckoo wakes me up
Nor do hedge flies create a buzz through the grove
There fairies sing in springs, there is shade of Chinar
Here sweltering heat and not a drop of water to drink
There graveyards are being crammed, here pyres are blazing
Men are disappearing and almond orchards have stopped to blossom

(Quoted by Riyaz Wani at Tehelka.com)

To conclude, the Kashmiri migrant pandits have also formed organisations like Panun Kashmir and many of them are trying to secure for them the status of internally displaced persons. On the occasion of World Refugees Day, members of Roots in Kashmir — a worldwide youth initiative of Kashmiri Pandits — came together at Jantar Mantar to protest against the indifference of the Indian government to their plight. The aim and objective of Panun Kashmir is to save Kashmir and to get their homeland back. The government of Jammu and Kashmir has also taken many constructive measures for the rehabilitation of Kashmiri migrant pandits to get them back to the valley. They have started special recruitment drives for Kashmiri migrant pandits and many young people have recently been appointed in different departments on the condition that they will stay back in valley for which they will be given all the protection. So the effort of getting them back their homeland is on but it is a time taking process and given the fact that in the past 20 or 22 years, many migrant pandits have settled permanently in many parts of India like Delhi, Jammu and Mumbai. But the important thing is that they have started writing about their lost homeland because their roots are actually in Kashmir and staying away from Kashmir means staying away from their roots. They may live in the best cities of India and outside India but the feeling of exile is always haunting them and sometimes this feeling is given outlet in the form of creative literature as many pandits have started writing based on the themes on nostalgia, loss of home and the resulting pain.

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