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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Plight of a Community amid Resistance

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on the traumatic experiences of Kashmiri Pandits in exile after their mass exodus during 1990s resistance movement as portrayed in Siddhartha Gigoo's novel, *The Garden of Solitude*. The novel bemoans the loss of their homeland, the forced separation of Kashmiri Pandits (Kashmiriyat), and their longing for the lost land. This paper analyses how Gigoo's novel documents the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley and how the author endeavors to give voice to a community who faces lack of identity.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandits, Resistance, Displacement, Refugee camps, Traumatic experiences, *The Garden of Solitude*.

Discussion:

With the eruption of the armed conflict in Kashmir from 1989 onwards, its people have undergone enormous sufferings. About this period Sumantra Bose in his book *Contested Lands*, writes:

The explosion came in January 1990, when massive demonstrations for *azaadi* (freedom) broke out in the city of Srinagar and other Valley towns, and panicked federal paramilitary police sent by New Delhi to contain the unrest opened fire, killing hundreds of protesters. ... in 1990 the conflict came home to roost with a vengeance as thousands of Kashmiri Muslim young men picked up the gun to fight Indian rule (178-79).

The escalation of the political turmoil in the valley led its people to face immense tragedies and hardships. This conflict has affected almost every member of each community in the state directly or indirectly. During 90s, when a large number of Kashmiri Muslims were being killed, hundreds tortured, thousands went disappearing, countless orphaned, and many raped. At the same time, Kashmiri Pandits also suffered in the form of migration. This shook the venerable bond of peace and harmony between Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits after the displacement of the minority communities, mainly the Kashmiri Hindus, from the valley. Undoubtedly the "ethnic cleansing" remains to be the darkest chapter in the history of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and has been a major blow to the face of Kashmiriyat. Against this backdrop is written *The Garden of Solitude* by Siddhartha Gigoo. In one of his interviews, Siddhartha Gigoo puts forward his experiences of the conflict and the consequent migration of his community as:

I did not have much research. The only thing I had was my memory. In 1990 I was 15 when the whole thing erupted. Overnight it happened; there was militancy, there were disappearances and, finally, there were killings. When the whole thing happened it was too shocking. I remember it happened on January 19, 1990. I was witnessing the whole thing unfolding layer by layer (Gigoo qtd. in *The Hindu* 2011).

Siddhartha Gigoo is one such Kashmiri born Pandit writer and author who left the valley in 1990. In his novel, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011), he has fictionalized the bruised memories and hardships of his displaced community during the 90s era. *The Garden of Solitude* is his debut work wherein he has tried to analyse the questions which could arise in the minds of the future generations who have little or no knowledge about the cause of their migration as Kashmiri Pandits formed an inseparable part of Kashmiri society.

The Garden of Solitude, revolves around a Kashmiri Pandit family who lived in the downtown area of Srinagar but with the wake of events get unwillingly driven away from the valley. The centre of action is focused on its protagonist, Sridar. The novel is written in four parts. Part first of the narrative is set in the 1980s – the period before insurgency erupted in Kashmir. It describes Sridar’s family, neighbours and their locality. It also throws light on Sridar’s “interest in books early in life” and his desire “to become a writer” (Gigoo 6). Prior to 90s, both Muslims and Pandits lived in a well knit social and cultural co-existence. However, soon things took an ugly turn with the rise of resistance movement and the armed insurgency fighting against the oppression. The uprising soon took its pace and a full-fledged rebellion enveloped the whole valley. This is exemplified through Mahanandju’s dream in the novel. He dreams:

An agitation will be launched in Kashmir. ... There will be a rebellion against India. The mujahedeen will infiltrate into Kashmir from across the border and take over the Valley. People will come out in the streets and wage a war: men, women and children, everyone. Every Muslim has been given a task to accomplish. ... The Pandits should either join the movement or leave Kashmir (Gigoo 16-17).

What makes us to admire Gigoo as a writer is his impartiality towards portraying the conflict. Gigoo has been at his best because his narrative has not remained one-sided. He does mention about the catastrophes that befell on the Kashmiri Muslims like curfews, strikes, massacres like the Zero Bridge shootings, swelling up of graveyards like the Martyrs graveyard at Eidgah and all this amid the struggle for freedom. He “speaks” of the resistance struggles in his native place and ultimately his aim has been to portray the idea of many facets of resistance in conflicted zones like Kashmir. A prominent newspaper quotes him saying:

[H]is intention was primarily to write a novel, not to document events, and significantly, he wanted to ensure it was “not just one-sided”. ... There was no cable TV or Internet so these things have gone undocumented. There were unfinished stories, unfinished conversations. (*The Hindu* 2011).

As the struggle was going on and hundreds of Muslims were being brutally killed. At the same time some group of militants began to target some of the prominent members of the Pandit community whom they believed were betraying the cause by helping the oppressors. At many places posters of threats could be located, “Each one of them read: ‘Pandits, leave Kashmir or perish forever’” writes Gigoo (41). This created fear and panic among the Pandits regarding their Muslim brethren. Gigoo writes:

Fear ruled their hearts of the Pandits, and they became suspicious of the Muslim neighbours and friends with whom they had 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 (32).

The initial signs of fear that Pandits felt was when Billa Puj’s brother Majid – a JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front) militant, threatens Professor Wakhlu and due to which his family decides to leave Kashmir. Similarly, Gigoo through his portrayal of the character of Justice Wangnoo has fictionalised Neel Kanth Ganjoo – the retired sessions judge, who had pronounced death sentence to the JKLF founder, Maqbool Bhatt. Another Pandit named Hira Lal was kidnapped by militants as they suspected him to be an informer of the army. Amarnath, a retired Professor also gets killed.

Finally, in between the fierce war for freedom, the Pandits preferred to move from valley to some safer places in order to save their lives. They left their Muslim brethren community and ignored their cause. This is exemplified by a conversation between Lasa’s neighbour and Lasa. The neighbour remarks:

The final hour has come ... ‘We are not safe here anymore. The situation is deteriorating rapidly. We must not stay here any longer. Muslims can’t be trusted now. They are ready to sacrifice their sons’. ... ‘The situation will not improve. A secret message has come to the Pandits to leave Kashmir. ... We have been promised safety in Jammu’. ... After all, we have nothing to do with the Muslims and their inane struggle for their liberation of Kashmir (Gigoo 46-47).

Gigoo in many passages has remarkably shown how Kashmiri Muslims pleaded Pandits to stay back and not leave their home and community. A Kashmiri Muslim, Manzoor tells Lasa while requesting him not to leave says, “Don’t leave your home. I will die to protect your family” (Gigoo, 56). Further he says, “Muslims are safe in Kashmir so long as the Pandits live here. Once the Pandits leave, the Indian forces will kill us” (Gigoo, 65). Another neighbour says, “Don’t leave your house. You will live with us in Independent Kashmir” (Gigoo, 57).

In another instance, an old man vehemently cries saying:

Pandits, do not leave your motherland. It is a conspiracy by our enemy to separate brother from brother. We will all be slaughtered like sheep now. It will rain bullets on innocent

Muslims. Jhelum will turn red with the blood of your brothers. Please, listen to me. I speak my soul. Pundits, do not leave this place. Without you, how will we exist? (Gigoo 67-68).

But, none of these assurances was enough to stop the Pandits. The novel also has a symbolical mention of the arrival of a new Governor of the state –Jagmohan to deal with the crisis. In this regard, Victoria Schofield writes:

His [Jagmohan's] return to full control of events in Kashmir on 19 January 1990 marked the beginning of a new intensity both in New Delhi's dealings with the Kashmiris and their response (147).

The old man who pleads the Pandits to stay back says, "The Hindu Governor has asked them to leave this place. He is the real villain. Islam does not teach violence. It is not right" (Gigoo, 68).

In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said maintains, "Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present" (Said, 1). This is evident at the very outset, of the Part Two of the novel where Gigoo beautifully points to what subconsciously lurked within the minds of Pandits after their 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 crippled memory, a child's play, a bubble (70).

Sridar's family like all other Pandit families leave Kashmir. The last three parts of the novel delineate the post-migration, sufferings and miseries of the Pandits. The novel depicts the sufferings experienced by the displaced Kashmiri Pandit families in the refugee camps in Jammu and other places. The Pandits had to live a life of misery in extreme wretched conditions and that too in a new environment. The author holds that, after displacement, their memory got adversely affected. The elderly who were overcome by trauma, suffered from dementia. In this regard, Gigoo writes:

In an adjacent tent a family of five torture an old man, their foster-grandfather, who lost his mental balance upon seeing his house fade away in a hazy distance. The old man is a burden for his son and daughter-in-law. Another mouth to feed, they feel! He moans at night constantly, and intermittently wakes up to a cold shiver – a nightmare. His son and daughter-in-law taunt him for their amusement. They whisper in his ears that his mother was dead and that she was beaten mercilessly to death. The old man groans and pleads them not to utter the atrocities. Every evening, the torment continues. The maddening laughter of the men ricochets from the tattered canvas tent. Every night the old cries. He gapes at his son and daughter-in-law and gives them his blessings (99-100).

This excerpt depicts that, in an unfamiliar climate and place it was very hard to cope for the aged and that too in the closing years of their life. Their resettlement in a new location made them constantly long for the lost homeland and this adversely affected their health.

However, in these refugee camps Pandits had no choice but to bare the humiliating hardships. These camps offered only a single room for an entire family. So, the inhabitants divided their single room by hanging old sarees that acted as walls. Bashir Dabla holds about these refugee camps, “one room that is used as the living-room-cum-bedroom-study-cum-store for an average family of five members” (78). In the mean time, Sridar is shown to move to Delhi for higher education and where he gets a job there. From Delhi, he moves to Allahabad, Benaras, Ladakh but his heart would always beat for his homeland. *The Book of Ancestors*, which Sridar manages to publish after all the hard efforts emphasizes this longing, “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).

The Garden of Solitude brings forth many realities and facets of the Kashmir conflict. Gigoo has highlighted the tearful tales of resistance, sufferings, betrayal, displacement and trauma in his novel.

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