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Refugee Stories: Mapping Psychiatric Morbidity in Siddhartha Gigoo's novel *The Garden of Solitude* and Meenakshi Raina's *The Divine and the Destiny*

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Abstract:

Conflict and its impact on mental health of people have engaged the attention of both the psychologists and creative writers. The parallel interdisciplinary engagement with the study of psychiatric morbidity has given new dimension to the critical understanding of the subjects. Following the impact of Freud and with the development of various psychological theories in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the attention of both the creative and critical writers was drawn towards a deeper understanding of human psyche. With the emergence of new theoretical assumptions, literary imagination was focused on exploring new techniques of narration and character portrayal. This paper aims at understanding the psychological problems ensuing from migration and displacement in Kashmiri Pandits in the light of Siddhartha Gigoo's novel *The Garden of Solitude* (2010) and Meenakshi Raina's *The Divine and the Destiny* (2013). Both the novels provide a nuanced picture of the suffering displaced families, frustrated through financial setbacks, intolerable climatic conditions and identity crisis. The paper will highlight how subsequently the "refugee-like" migrant existence debilitated the mental health of different characters in the novels.

Keywords: Depression, Migration, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Pandits, Conflict.

Introduction

In Kashmir armed conflict induced migration and displacement of the minority Hindu community from 1989 onwards. These Kashmiri Hindus comprised a numerically small but historically privileged cultural and religious community in the Muslim-majority region of Kashmir Valley in Jammu and Kashmir. Belonging to the same caste of Sarasvat Brahmanas, these Hindus are popularly known as Pandits. Their mass exodus at the outset of conflict in the Valley moulded them into a new identity of being called as "refugees" or "internally displaced persons." Internally displaced people can be defined as those "who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violation of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally

recognized state border” (Hampton 5). A near about 2.5 to 3 lakh Kashmiris migrated from the valley (Mishra). The catastrophic mass exodus changed the social fabric of the state. Leaving all their movable and immovable properties unsafe behind, Kashmiri Pandits left with an ache of homelessness, isolation and alienation. Most of them resettled in temporary arrangements in Jammu, the main city in the chiefly Hindu southern region of the state of Jammu and Kashmirⁱ. “Migrants arrived in Jammu to find that the state had made no preparations for their accommodation, relief and rehabilitation. They talked about being shocked, upon their arrivals in Jammu, to find that problems of overcrowding severely limited their options for housing or employment” (Duschinski 46). Existence became burdensome in the slum-like camps that lacked basic amenities of a decent livelihood like drinking water, electricity, health and hygiene. The claustrophobia of cramped apartments intensified with other accompanying problems of unemployment, poverty and destitution. “From lush green cold environment, they have landed into hot and dry areas, which they find totally uncomfortable” (Dhingra 218). The very essence of their whole life altered. Boredom induced young boys to evils of crime and drug abuse. Common bathrooms and open latrines deprived people mostly women of privacy and social security. Large families suffocated in small camp rooms denied people a private space. This led to sexual starvation, emotional frustration and adversely affected the population growth. Lack of proper health and hygiene invited a host of lethal diseases hitherto unknown in the community. The undercurrent of terror, acclimatization, sense of total deprivation, loss and uprootedness told upon the mental health of the poor people. There is a psychiatric morbidity in the Pandit community consequent to migration, the problems of acclimatization to an entirely different and hostile environment, overcrowding, poor-housing, insanitary unhygienic conditions, scarce medical facilities and malnutrition.

The mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits led to a kind of creative writing which reflected the pain, pathos, displacement, anger, nostalgia and protest of the community. Like the novels, Siddhartha Gigoo's, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) and Meenakshi Raina's *The Divine and the Destiny* (2013) narrate the story of Kashmiri Pandits when they abandoned their homes and migrated from the Valley. The narratives are revealing in its context of socio-political harshness and loss of cultural heritage. The story tellers have given a vent to their psychological frustration through writing as they find themselves as unacknowledged sufferers. As Rahul Pandits says in his memoir, *Our Moon has Blood Clots* (2013), “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).

Migration and Neurosis

“The process of migration creates mental stresses which, in turn, precipitate mental disorders in susceptible individuals” (Thomas 97-98). Leo Eitinger in his article, “The Incidence of Mental Disease among Refugees in Norwayⁱⁱ” elaborates upon the psychological effect of migration and displacement:

The first and immediate feeling in a strange milieu will usually be this particular feeling of loneliness and rejection. The manifold external expressions do not create any feelings of solidarity, of an understanding of the situation or of the inner meaning of the impressions, and first and foremost, no understanding of the individual's position in the whole of this unknown and overwhelming system. It is precisely this lack of ability to receive, to understand, to develop and to react to the surroundings which causes this apparent but none-the-less very familiar paradox of feeling isolated, of being totally alone.

We have thus two different mechanisms which cause psychotic reactions. The primitive, unabsorbed feeling of being over whelmed by outside impressions and stimuli which cannot be digested, and thus lead to confusion, and in addition to this the reaction to the feeling of loneliness, which is first and foremost marked by insecurity. The feeling of "not belonging"; of not being able to take a role in some form or other, of not knowing what is expected of one, adds insecurity to isolation. (Thomas 99)

According to estimates by the Government of India, 56246 families have migrated from the valley since 1990. Of these, 34305 families stay in Jammu, 19338 families in Delhi and 2603 in other statesⁱⁱⁱ. "While majority of the migrants are living under their own arrangements with friends, relatives etc, and in hired accommodation, 4778 families in Jammu and 238 families in Delhi are staying in relief camps" (Banal, et al. 155). The displacement of Kashmiri Pandits led to many psychological and behavioral disturbances in them. Isolation and alienation traumatized them. "Epidemiological studies amongst displaced and war-affected populations have yielded high rates of mental disorders, especially post-traumatic stress and depression symptoms" (Banal, et al. 155). A study conducted by Jagdish Thappa, et al.^{iv} on a group of adults of Kashmiri Pandits residing in the Muthi camp at Jammu found a prevalence of psychiatric disorders among them. The study found the prevalence of psychiatric disorders was maximum (41.5%) among the elder generation, highly affected by disorders like depression, dysthymia, agoraphobia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), insomnia, generalized anxiety disorders (GAD), alcoholism, suicidal tendencies and other social phobias.

Anxiety, Depression and Nightmares

Anxiety and depression frequently find an expression through sleep disorders like insomnia, nightmares and nyctophobia. "The co-occurrence of depression and sleep disorders is so frequent that some authors have suggested that, in the absence of sleep complaints, a diagnosis of depression should be made with caution" (Luca, et al. 10033). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*^v defines nightmare as an "extremely frightening dream" waking up a person abruptly. "Once awake, the individual quickly recovers orientation, preserves a detailed memory of the complicated plot of the nightmare (usually involving threats to survival, to

security, or to self-esteem), and can hardly return to sleep" (Luca et al. 1034). Melancholic depressed people present an increased tendency of nightmares.

In both the novels, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) and *The Divine and the Destiny* (2013), the main characters experience nightmares which are external expressions of the fear, anxiety and depression caused by a sense of their insecure and instable future in Kashmir. Before migration, Shereen, the protagonist in *The Divine and the Destiny* (2013), is woken up, sweating and gasping for air, by a nightmare, which she later calls as the "red river dream." After gaining consciousness she says, "I saw myself running away from the river in which flowed the red water with terrible lights flashing on all sides. I could not see anyone; all I saw was shadows moving around" (Raina 16). Red River becomes a powerful symbol in the novel which foretells the ensuing bloodshed and violence. Shereen's running away in the dream anticipates the exodus and migration of her community from Kashmir. Likewise, the sub-conscious anxiety about the uncertain status of Kashmiri Pandits is externalized in the dreams of many characters in the novel, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011). The grave digger Abdul Gani appears in Mahanandju's dream, forewarning him about the upcoming tragic events likely to happen in their lives. The dream is in the form of a dialogue between the two characters, with Gani as a representative of his Muslim community, familiar to the idea of *Azadi* and Mahanandju as a bewildered Kashmiri Pandit, though intuitively informed about the following catastrophe but unaware of the inside story of Kashmiri Muslims.

Mahanandju dreamt a dream. It was an unfamiliar place with familiar trees. Gani was standing under a fruit-laden tree. A black crow was grazing nearby. When Gani saw Mahanandju, he twitched and then farted. Mahanandju smiled and neared Gani.

'Don't come near me, Doctor Sahib. Keep standing where you are. An agitation will be launched in Kashmir. I saw a letter in a mosque. 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. Even the muezzin of the mosque has to perform a new role in this movement to liberate Kashmir, and save Islam from the infidels. Nizam-e-Mustafa will dawn over us.'

'What about us?' Mahanandju asked

'The Pandits should either join the movement or leave Kashmir. Destiny has been written for us. We will be independent. Our children will live in peace in independent Kashmir. Everyone is waiting for that day. The judgement will be pronounced in favour of the sufferers, the Muslims.'

'When is this going to start Abdul?'

'Soon, very soon! Insha'Allah! Abdul Gani said. (Gigoo 16-17)

Mahanandju's dream predicted an apocalypse of Kashmiri Pandits, the presence of black crow in the dream foreshadows ill omen and Gani's farting in front of a respectable Pandit portentously symbolizes the insult and disrespect which the Kashmiri Hindu community met with during exodus. Most of the Kashmiri Pandits opted to leave instead of joining hands with the Muslim brethren. The mental stress and anxiety in Lasa's Pandit neighbour is again seen pouring in his nightmare, which he later describes to Lasa as,

'Lasa, last night I dreamt that I was dead, killed by a bullet while walking on the bridge. I saw my own dead body floating in the river. I saw my mother petrified at the ghastly sight. She kept telling herself that she would not cry or mourn,' the neighbour narrated.

'It is only a dream. Let us not be cowards,' Lasa said.

'We are cowards. It is better to be a coward and hide than perish at the hands of militants. After all, we have nothing to do with the Muslims and their inane struggle for the liberation of Kashmir. I cannot ignore my foreboding dream. I have decided to leave.' (Gigoo 46-47).

Again, on his way to Jammu, what Lassa dreams turn out to be an "objective correlative" to his inner turmoil and emotional chaos. Cognizant of his changing state from being a permanent settler to a nomad, Lassa dreams that,

He rode a horse on the edge of a distant mountain. He saw a gojar girl laughing at the smiling Yamberzlas. He saw her run from her flock towards the frothy waters of a distant brook, which ran noisily in a serene cornfield. He saw abandoned gojar dwellings on a slope of a mountain. The horse stopped and Lasa sat down in one of the dwellings and went to sleep. (Gigoo 68-69)

Lasa's dwelling in one of gojar houses predicts his future nomadic life in camps. Pandits will be reduced to the status of gojars, who are temporary settlers and have to wander for their livelihood. Lasa's dream voices an inherent stress and anxiety in him about the future of his community. All these nightmarish experiences depict the inner turmoil and psychological tension in the Pandit characters which later on takes the shape of other mental disorders in the novels.

Nyctophobia, Insomnia, Delusions and Amnesia

The problem of unemployment became another reason for triggering the psychological depression among Pandits. A chronic anxiety due to joblessness led to a drastic relative deterioration of the mental health of many characters in the novels. Shereen's papa, who has a doctorate in mathematics, is rejected for being over-qualified for different jobs and ends up "watching the lizards fighting on the walls" of his dingy apartment (Raina56). Doctors diagnose him being afflicted with severe depression. For him the migration from Kashmir acted like a slow poison. Shereen narrates,

All these five years after migration from Kashmir, Papa had been suffering from depression which had affected his body, mind and soul.

Papa summarized the last five years of his life with a mathematical figure – 'Zero'; it was a hard truth. He was right about being reduced to a value of Zero. These five years had uprooted him from his motherland, made him homeless, jobless and confined to four walls. He had health problems which included depression and insomnia that he had been fighting, and his colourful life had turned colourless. (Raina 136)

Gradually, Shereen's papa develops nyctophobia, a phobia of darkness. Darkness made him nervous. A constant fear made him to keep his bedside lamp dimmed beside him but later after a few months, he could not bear to sleep in absolute darkness. "He had become reluctant to go out at night and if he had to, he experienced an increased heart rate and sickness" (Raina 91). Shereen's aunt, Nisha who is one among those widows whose fate is sealed by the armed conflict suffers from insomnia and nyctophobia. She is seen taking sleeping pills in the novel. Lost in her beautiful past, Nisha hallucinates and is always lost in the memories of her husband, talking to him as though he is alive. Mahanandju is seen engulfed by idleness and a vacuum of the soul. "He started having delusions. Sleep fled him. His thoughts oscillated back and forth the past and the present, the imaginary and the real" (Gigoo 113). A fragmented memory and amnesia overpowered his vigor and vitality. Old age and exile killed people slowly. The condition was akin to what Lasa describes to Qazi, "A strange madness has engulfed us" (Gigoo 133). Mahanandju's character is a representative of every person from the elder generation of Pandits who unlike young people had no hope in the future and hence turned out to be the worst casualties of conflict. His life gradually becomes more miserable as Lasa says,

He has lost his memory partially. He takes dreams and illusions for real and he confuses reality with dreams. He is beyond any treatment now and his mental condition will deteriorate rapidly. That is what the doctor said. Alzheimer's! In the days to follow, Mahanandju lost his appetite completely. He ate only a few morsels. Between morsels, he stopped and gazed at the wall. He forgot to complete his sentences.

His skin started to decay. He lost the ability to recognise people and things. His eyes became grey. (Gigoo 171-73)

Migration and exodus landed Kashmiri Pandits in an alien atmosphere which not only affected their economic, social and political conditions but significantly percolated in their psyches. This harsh reality is explored by the novelists through an introspective incursion into the minds of different characters. The inner consciousnesses of characters reveal the true story of the unfortunate community. In uncovering the psychological realism, writing becomes what Anita Desai says, "a process of discovering the truth – the truth that is, nine-tenth of the iceberg that lies submerged beneath the one-tenth visible portion we call Reality" (Desai 348). Migration landed most of characters in neurosis, especially the elder generation, nonetheless there are

characters in the novels like Sridar, Shereen, her mother and Aryan who deny succumbing to the depressing situation and reconcile with their conditions.

ⁱ Meenakshi Parimoo gives a detailed account of the situation faced by the migrants in Jammu in her M.A. thesis entitled "Turbulence in Kashmir' : Social Work intervention with the Displaced." Bombay: University of Bombay Library, (1995).

ⁱⁱ To understand the dynamics of migration and mental health refer to Leo Eitinger's article, "The Incidence of Mental Disease among Refugees in Norway." *The British Journal of Psychology*, 105(1959): 326-338. Web.

ⁱⁱⁱ Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Rajya Sabha, August 2002. Available from: www. India disaster. Org [accessed on 15 Feb. 2017].

^{iv} For a detailed case study, consult the article, "Psychiatric Morbidity in Adult Kashmiri Migrants Living in a Migrant Camp at Jammu."

^v American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000. Print.

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