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## **Portrayal of Human Predicament: A Study of Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude and A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories***

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### **Abstract:**

The article is prepared to study the select literary works of Siddhartha Gigoo written on Kashmiri Pandit Community who lived with their Muslim brethren for centuries in communal harmony with human bond and mutual respect for each other. The two communities shared same cultural, social, and economic fabric and subsequent political uprising, insurgency and militancy that wreaked havoc in the whole of Kashmir Valley. However, the conflict posed great threat to life and property of Kashmiri Pandits forcing them to migrate to Jammu and other parts of the country. The present study looks at how the events of 1990's in Kashmir Valley gravely affected the common masses and Pandit Community in particular; the historical events and conflicts portraying the human predicament of the affected community. The study is based on the premise that literature, directly or indirectly, deals with human problems and issues specific to particular time and space. Literature in contemporary Kashmir is witnessed with creative experience and expression produced in extreme conditions of violence caused by combative politics, militancy and cultural dissolution. The literature of Kashmir is a reflection of the human agony and predicament caused by the extremely turbulent political crisis that has torn apart the centuries old communal, cultural, and social bond of the people. Because of the political crisis in Kashmir Valley, the communal harmony and peaceful co-existence has seen adverse effects. Siddhartha

Gigoo is of vital importance so far as the portrayal of the human predicament, suffering and displacement of Kashmiri Pandit Community is concerned.

**Keywords: History, Fiction, Kashmiri Pandits, Conflict, Militancy, Insurgency, Exodus, Refugee Camps, Trauma, Predicament.**

## **Introduction**

Siddhartha Gigoo is an Indian writer and film-maker. He was born in the downtown area of Srinagar, Kashmir in 1971. He was brought up in Kashmir until he turned fifteen years old. He and his family, along with thousands of other Pandit families, left from Kashmir in 1990 due to political turmoil, militancy, uncertainty and abundant threats to Kashmiri Pandit Community.

Siddhartha Gigoo studied English Literature at JNU, New Delhi. He published his first novel, *The Garden of Solitude* in 2011. *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories* was published in 2015 which was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. His second novel, *Mehr: A Love Story* was published in 2018. He also authored *The Loin of Kashmir*, that was published in 2020. He has also co-edited two anthologies, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits*, 2015 and *Once We Had Everything: Literature in Exile*, 2019. He has also to his credit a short fiction, *Love in the Time of Quarantine* that he published in April 2020. He has also written and directed two short films, *The Last Day*, a film set against the backdrop of forced migration of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland in 1990 and *Goodbye, Mayfly*. The films have won numerous awards at international film festivals. His literary works appear in many literary journals.

## **Historical Background**

Historically, Kashmir refers to the Kashmir Valley. At present, Kashmir denotes to an area that includes Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory and Ladakh Union Territory, the Pakistan administered Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan and China Occupied regions of Aksai Chin and Karakoram.

The Kashmir Valley had been an important abode of Buddhism, Hinduism, Shivaism and other schools of thought. Islam found its way in Kashmir in 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, the glory of the previous civilizations continued in the Kashmir Valley. Shah Mir was the first ruler of Kashmir.

He laid the foundation of Shah Mir Dynasty. Muslim monarchs ruled Kashmir for five centuries. The Mughal Empire ruled Kashmir from 1586 to 1751 while Afghan Durrani Empire ruled Kashmir from 1747 to 1819. However, Maharaja of Jammu, Gulab Singh purchased the Kashmir from the British under the Treaty of Amritsar. Maharaja Gulab Singh became the new ruler of Kashmir. The rule of Maharaja Gulab Singh and his descendants continued until 1947. During the partition, the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir became disputed. At present Jammu and Kashmir is administered by three countries: India, Pakistan and China. However, Maharaja Hari Singh, the then ruler of State, had signed the agreement of accession with the Union of India.

In 1947 the government of India asked Hari Singh to leave Jammu and Kashmir state and handed over the reigns of the State to Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the leader of National Conference. Since 1947 a bitter hatred developed between India and Pakistan and three wars have been fought between them over Kashmir. The growing dispute over Kashmir and the consistent failure of democracy led to the rise of Kashmir separatism and militancy in the state. Because of disputed elections of 1987 in Kashmir, the youth of Kashmir such as HAJY group- Abdul Hamid Sheikh, Javed Ahmad Mir, Ashfaq Majid Wani, and Mohammad Yasin Malik were recruited by J&K Liberation Front. In July 1988 a number of strikes, protests, attacks and opposition to the Indian administration in Jammu and Kashmir began the Kashmir insurgency. The year 1989 witnessed an unprecedented increase in militancy, insurgency and conflict in the Kashmir Valley. The insurgent groups from Afghanistan also infiltrated in the Kashmir Valley following the end of the Soviet Afghan War. The Pakistan on the other hand provided arms and training to militants groups of Kashmir. The conflict between the militants and the Indian forces led to the large scale of casualties. Thousands of civilians also lost their lives as a result of being targeted by the various armed groups.

In August 2019, the Government of India scraped the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under the Article 370 of the Indian constitution. The Parliament of India passed the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act on 5th August 2019. The Act contained the provisions to dissolve the state and reorganize it into two Union Territories- Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.

### **Displacement of Kashmiri Pandits**

The Displacement of Kashmiri Pandits took place in 1989-1990 in which the members of minority Hindu families were targeted, threatened and accused of being secret agents and

supporters of Indian Government leading to the forced exodus of Pandit Community from the Kashmir Valley to Jammu and other parts of India. The exodus and exile of Kashmiri Pandits was an anti-Hindu conspiracy that took place after militancy erupted in Kashmir Valley in 1989, forcing Kashmiri Pandit families to seek shelter in Jammu and rest of the country. The worst phase of the displacement of Pandit community was in the early 1990s, when Kashmiri Hindus left valley enmass due to continued threats to their life and property. Consequently, 19th January 1990 is widely known by Kashmiri Hindus as "Exodus Day", in memory of the Kashmiri Hindus who were either killed or forced to leave Kashmir Valley.

### **Portrayal of Human Predicament**

Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, 2011 in which the first part of the narrative is set in 1980's Kashmir, when militancy was yet to erupt. The novel presents the protagonists' peaceful life in his native land Srinagar, Kashmir. During this peaceful life the Hindus and the Muslims coexisted in social and cultural harmony. In those days, the Hindus and Muslims participated and celebrated festivals of each other. However, things did not remain same when militancy and insurgency erupted in early 1989. The militants targeted and accused prominent members of the Pandit community of being secret agents of Indian government. Fearing mass killings, the Pandits left Kashmir to safer places of the country particularly to Jammu and Delhi. The protagonist of the novel, Sridar and his family, like many other Pandits, decided to migrate to refugee camps set up for Pandit migrants in Jammu. Pandit families thus left Kashmir Valley enmass to save their precious lives. "Some even barefoot with hardly any belongings-- caravans of men, women and children running away from their homes and hearths." (Gigoo: 22)

The Separatist Ideology, militancy and Pakistan sponsored insurgency wreaked havoc to the peace and normal life in Kashmir. The conflict in Kashmir brought difficult times to both the Pandits and the Muslims Communities. Although, Muslims continued living in their homeland, Kashmir, they suffered equally. Thousands of Muslims in Kashmir lost their beloved ones in the conflict torn state. The life in Kashmir became miserable due to militant attacks, their encounters with security forces, frequent shutdown calls by Separatist groups, public protests, search-operations, stone-pelting with security forces and increasing alienation of Kashmiri Youth. This led Kashmir to turn into one of the most conflicted zones of the world.

Both Central and state government failed to protect the lives and homeland of Pandit families who were forced to leave their homes and property for the sake of survival. The Pandit families were left alone in an alien land to search for the new abode. They were separated from their relatives, friends, neighbours without wishing each other in the darkest hours of the night. “Each truck carried a home, and homelessness. Each truck trudged on inexorably; with terror-stricken faces looking pitifully all around.” (Gogoo: 66)

Siddhartaha Gigoo explains the plight and helplessness of the devastated Kashmiri Pandit families in *The Garden of Solitude*. The mutual fear, grief and feelings of homelessness of Kashmiri Pandits were visible at the Qazigund stop while leaving for Jammu is tormenting:

There were some who had left without informing their brothers. Qazigund was a place which united brothers and cousins, who had spent years living separately due to family feuds. Brothers and cousins who didn't talk to one another in their homes embraced when they met at Qazigund. It was a strange feeling of horror, consolation and grief, which united brothers who hadn't talked for years. A sense of homelessness ignited their hearts with love for one another. A sense of loss made them embrace each other and seek solace in grief. Each one had a story to narrate. They narrated stories of the last few days in their homes to others, whom they had never known. (Gigoo: 67)

The miserable life that the Pandit migrants in the camps at Jammu undergo is heart wrenching. Mahanandju, Lasa and his son Sridar become the eye witness based on their interactions with other fellow Pandit migrants in the tented camps at Jammu. The miserable conditions of Pandit migrants can be looked upon at physical and psychological level. The physical conditions begin with the killing of the prominent Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley even before the mass migration in 1990. The Kashmiri pandits were forced to leave their homes in the darkest hours of the night in crowded trucks creating the pitiable images of the migration. The majority of migrant Pandits were compelled by circumstances to live in the crowded and dingy migrant tented camps in Jammu. In these camps Pandits migrant experience the humiliation and hardships. The accommodation provided to the Pandit migrants in Jammu was worse than the slums. The Kashmiri Pandit migrants feel deserted and look fatigued when they assemble at the registration centres for getting registered as the genuine migrants to this new abode.

Pamposh, a friend of Sridar whom he meets during one of his visits to the camps while exploring the condition of Pandit migrants. Pamposh's speech in second part of the novel provides the post-migration predicament and pitiable conditions of Pandit migrants in camps. He talks about the stinking puddles of water in which his mother washes the utensils, the narrow room in which they can't stretch their arms and legs, the unreal smile on his mother's face, the frozen silence on his grandfather's face, the biting snakes and insects, and the itching heat of summers in Jammu. Pamposh talks about the suffering and pathetic condition of his mother and sister:

My mother and sister wash their clothes and the utensils in a puddle of water outside of our tent. They line up for hours in the morning to use the makeshift toilet made of torn shreds of canvas, pieces of cardboard and tin. They await their turn at the filthy and stinking toilets while the loitering men watch the women wait to relieve themselves. Many women prefer to go to the stinking latrines at midnight, away from the stare of men. (Gigoo: 98)

Pamposh concludes the miserable condition of his family with a sentence that also sums up the agony and suffering of all the Pandit migrants: "We lick the hours that weigh heavy on our half-asleep existence, and tread laboriously into an endless strain of nightmares" (99).

Many of the Pandits have penned their account of the pain and torture they underwent during the last decade of the twentieth century:

This has been a decade of agony, trauma and for some excruciating pain of hellish living condition, penury, untimely death of dear ones, loss and destruction of property and sources of livelihood. But this has also been a time of fortitude and resilience and our resolve to deal with and overcome adverse circumstances with courageous and purposeful endeavour. (Pandit: 86)

The physical condition of the Pandit migrants is summed up in the letter written by Lasa to his son, Sridar. His son is in Delhi going from place to place in search of a job and while Lasa visits every family in the migrants camps to witness and experience physical predicament among the inhabitants of almost every Kashmiri Pandit family. Lasa writes about this plight to his son, Sridar:

I met husbands who had lost the love for their wives, and wives who no longer felt the need to hold their husband's hands. Some couples have not shared an intimate moment ever

since they left their homes. Living in the tents has turned them into cold humans. They have forgotten to love, to caress, and to touch. They no longer feel the warmth. They don't wake up to the warm embraces. They live lives devoid of passion, of desire, of craving. They go to bed tired, and wake up exhausted. They huddle in the dusty corners of the tents. (Gigoo: 156-57)

Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, 2015 is an anthology of sixteen short stories which takes the reader to the world of conflict, exile and suffering. These stories portray a world where one can witness the loss of human lives, wailing at the departure of the loved ones, the displacement of helpless minority Pandit families, the wretched conditions of living in dingy and tattered tents, the longing for home. The stories in the book depict the mutual co-existence, the good old friendships, memories, suffering and devastation.

Siddhartha Gigoo's stories are allegorical in nature. He explicitly mentions the Kashmir Valley and narrates the stories of the people who faced turmoil, exodus and continued suffering. Through these stories Gogoo has tried to paint the true picture of the conflict of early 1990s and its impact on Kashmiri Pandit Community. The stories talk about living in a place devastated by conflict and how this takes a toll on the people and changes their lives. The stories draw an explicit portrayal of the predicament faced in conflict regions like Kashmir Valley

*A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories* begins with the story, *The Search*, which describes the life of a research who takes interest in history and biographies of the people expelled from their native lands. He discovers and learns about the Kashmiri Hindus while visiting the library at the Museum of the Disappearing Clans. Gogoo in the story makes signs about the human loss, of culture, of language and disrespect of ancient Hindu heritage in Kashmir.

*The Last Haircut* depicts that period of Kashmir Valley when prominent members of Kashmiri Pandit community were persecuted. In the story two young boys are recruited in militant groups. They are given an important task of killing a Kashmiri Pandit, Wasadev who is also their teacher. The story portrays the picture of 1989-90 Kashmir Valley. It was a time when Kashmiri Pandit families were forced to leave their native land, Kashmir. The Pandits were being accused of secret agents and supporters of Indian Government. The Kashmiri Pandit families left Kashmir Valley enmass after persecution of their community members.

In *Poison, Nectar*, Gigoo narrates the story of a Kashmiri Hindu family living as refugees in a tattered tent. The family was forced to leave their home land, Kashmir. Lalit lives with his wife, old mother and ailing bedridden father. The couple have no children. The retired school headmaster, one of the migrants, would visit Lalit every morning and evening to pass time and discuss the affairs of the camp dwellers. The family like other fellow migrants too suffers immensely. The tents in which they live are dingy and tattered. There are big holes through which the errant boys from the neighbouring locality would peer inside. The iron poles that support the tents would wobble in the winds. The thing that worry the dwellers most is the damp flooring. Since everyone living in the tents has no beds, the water would disturb their nights during rainy season.

“The family members seldom talked to one another. When it was time to sleep, the two women just reclined in a corner of the tent and pretended to sleep. Lalit’s wife couldn’t sleep peacefully. At times, she woke up in the middle of the night,.... Lalit seldom comforted his wife or asked her how she felt. He never asked her if she desired anything.”  
(Gigoo: 45-46)

*Danseuse of the River* is yet another story of Gigoo about a Kashmiri Pandit migrant family. The family is living in Government built camp as refugees away from their home land, Kashmir. The narrator of the story visits the family. Nagraj, the head of the family lives with his wife and old ailing mother. The family has seen the worst and lived a life of illness, insomnia, and amnesia. The narrator observes:

They struggled with the daily monotony of life, battling a sense of vacuum and despair, eventually growing old far too quickly, not realizing that age had invaded them and made them fragile and sick, until they could not bear any more. They fell apart, both mentally and physically. (Gigoo: 184)

## **Conclusion**

The select literary works of Siddhartha Gigoo present a true account of the varied perspectives of Kashmir conflict representing the reality and experience of Kashmiri Pandits after militancy and insurgency wreaked havoc in the Kashmir Valley. Gigoo sincerely undertakes the

case of the neglected Kashmiri Pandit community and vividly highlights their miserable life, suffering and predicament. The author cautiously brings out the complex story of the Kashmir conflict and its adverse effects on minority Kashmiri Pandit community. The works of Gigoo never claim to depict reality objectively or in its entirety rather the strength of his works lie in the way they give a voice to the varied aspects of Kashmir conflict. Gigoo's works let him to be away from the dominant narratives to articulate the suffering and devastation that Kashmiri Pandits have gone through. His literary works give voice to the people who otherwise have been denied their due place in history and whose very roots and identity are in extreme danger of extinction.

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