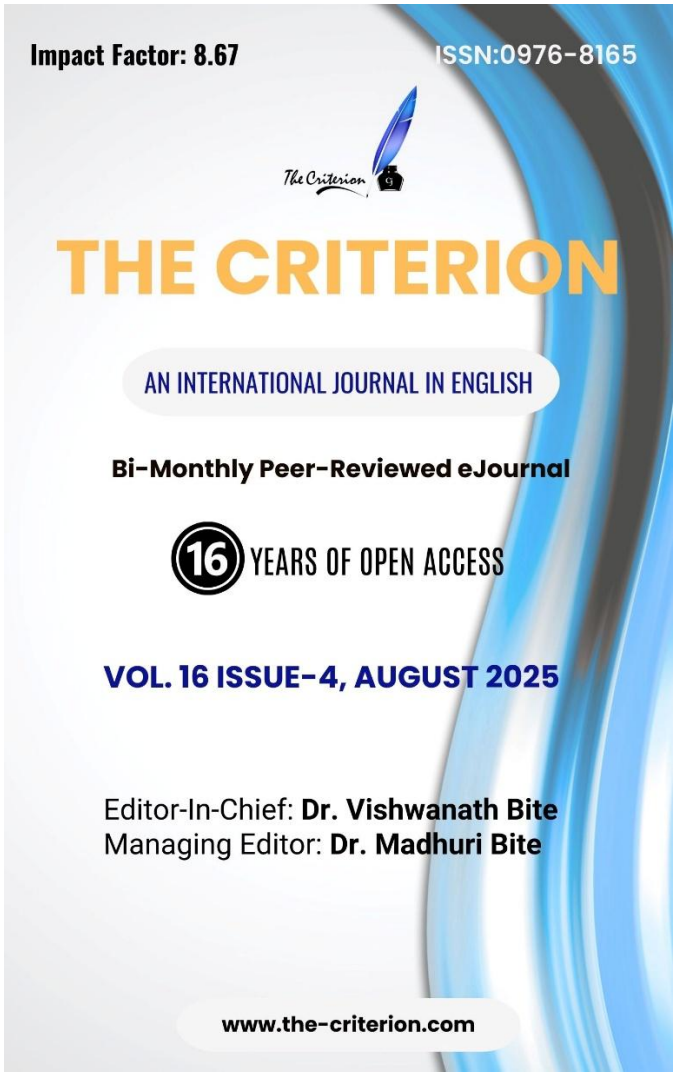

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Vulnerability, Resistance and the Idea of Home: Study of a Kashmiri Memoir

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Abstract:

Home has been one of the most challenging and enigmatic questions for the Kashmiri Pandits in recent decades. The Pandits had to flee from their centuries-old ancestral homeland to escape persecution. Hostility perpetrated against the Pandits turned their lives into a piteous existence, forcing them to live in refugee camps for decades without any chances of peaceful resettlement or re-rooting in Kashmir, the much cherished homeland. This paper undertakes to analyse Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Season of Ashes* (2024) to examine the ideas of home, vulnerability and resistance in the context of the uprooted Pandit community of Kashmir, which inevitably brings into play the concepts of identity and belongingness. In analyzing Gigoo's memoir that records the precarious existence of the Pandits in camps who constantly suffer from a sense of colossal loss, the paper will also try to assess the debate circling around the notion of Kashmiriyat at the present times.

Keywords: Vulnerability, resistance, home, exile, migration, identity, fragmented memory.

Jawaharlal Nehru, in his "Foreword" to *Rajatarangini: The Saga of the Kings of Kashmir* significantly writes from Dehra Dun Jail on June 28, 1934, "Kashmir had been the meeting ground

of the different cultures of Asia, the western Graeco-Roman and Iranian and the Western Mangolian, but essentially it was a part of India and the inheritor of Indo-Aryan traditions" (x). Nehru was quite right in his opinion in that Kashmir had been the home for several races of people who have embraced it at different times. Cultural heterogeneity of Kashmir is an outcome of such human settlements. Unified identity of the Kashmiris, broadly denoted by the term Kashmiriyat, includes the autochthonous and the settler communities living there who have contributed to the unique language, culture and heritage of this geo-political space. Riyaz Punjabi's scholarly comment that "The lineage of Kashmiri people had given them distinctive looks; the fusion and assimilation of varied faiths and cultures had resulted in their particular and specific ethnicity. The land, the climate, the geography shaped the evolution of their particular ethnic profile. A common language bound them closer into a distinct cultural grouping" (n. page), reiterates and solidifies the generalised opinion about the Kashmiris and the Kashmiriyat. An atmosphere of peace prevailed in Kashmir in the past as the inhabitants, irrespective of their faith, clung to the principle of equality inspired by the medieval verses of the *Rishinama* and the *Nurnama*, believed to be written by Hindu and Sufi preachers of peace (Akbar 6). When looked at from the perspective of governance, one finds that Kashmir had maintained an autonomous status for much of its history. It experienced intermittent external interference in its internal affairs from the Afghans, the Mughals, the Sikhs and the British. However, disturbances of an extreme political nature began to tear apart the Kashmiri society and its traditional ethos from around the time of the Partition of India in 1947. Aggression shown by Pakistan to claim Kashmir's proud possession, the then king of Kashmir, Hari Singh's consequent letter of annexation to India and India's approach to the United Nations regarding its conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir have combined to create an issue that remains unresolved till date. All these developments in the middle of the twentieth century

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made the fragmentation of Kashmir's diverse population most visible in its contemporary history. In this context, Sumantra Bose significantly observes that in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, "*social* heterogeneity is reflected in a high degree of *political* fragmentation and complexity" (10). Bose further opined that the "most basic political cleavage in J&K is constituted not by party loyalties but by much more fundamental fault lines – conflicting national identities and state allegiances" (10).

In the political conflict for assertion of identity and dispute over the ownership of Kashmir, the Kashmiri population has fragmented into three distinct categories. This categorisation follows the logic of state allegiances or self-determination as it is evident in the very terms used to describe them — pro-independence for Kashmir, pro-Indian and pro-Pakistani. Consequent to such fragmentation of the people and Kashmir becoming one of the most debated territories of the twentieth century, the cultural community that has become the worst victim over the decades is the Kashmiri Pandits. The Pandits have faced marginalisation, which is the direct fallout of what Mr. Jagmohan refers to as the "tempo of subversion in the valley" (401). Pandits are the original inhabitants of Kashmir who have immensely contributed to the formation, growth and sustenance of the culture and heritage of Kashmir throughout the centuries. Considering the centrality of Kashmiri Pandits in Kashmir's cultural life, T.N. Pandit writes: "Kashmiri Pandits … constitute a community as part of the larger Kashmiri society and shares with other Kashmiri communities the ethos and umbrella of the Kashmiri culture" (5). They are the indigenous Hindu minority cultural group of Kashmir, and though high-caste Hindus, they do not have much affinity with their counterparts living in the plains of India. Instead, they have much commonality with the Kashmiri Muslims and "share a history, a locality, and a culture with the Muslim majority of the Valley" (Bose 12).

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In the last one or two decades, several authors, originally hailing from Kashmir, have tried to bring the issue of tremendous loss suffered by the Kashmiri Pandits into the political discourse through their fictional and non-fictional writings. Siddhartha Gigoo is one of the most conspicuous authors, who, in his maiden novel *Garden of Solitude* (2011), has dealt with the notion of Kashmiriyat as perceived and experienced in the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of this millennium. The back cover of Gigoo's first novel declares that *Garden of Solitude* is about the "stories that are on the verge of being forgotten by a generation; stories about identity and ancestry". *A Long Season of Ashes*, published in 2024, continues the author's concern with the enigmatic question of home for the Kashmiri Pandits who, under unfortunate circumstances, are compelled to live their lives as refugees in their own country i.e. India, as we, as a nation state, uphold the sanctity of the Instrument of Accession signed by Maharaja Hari Singh, the king of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947. The situations of the Pandits, as narrativised in the novel and recorded in the memoir, bring to the fore hordes of questions that centre around the colossal loss suffered by each member of the Pandit community. The following pages aim to analyse and examine the issues of loss of identity, home, vulnerability and resistance through the perspectives of four generations of Kashmiri Pandits that the writer has included in the memoir *A Long Season of Ashes*.

A. The generation of grandparents:

As recorded in the memoir *A Long Season of Ashes*, the Kashmiri Pandits, including Gigoo's family, had to flee from the Kashmir Valley to save their lives in the wake of the eruption of violence and militancy in Kashmir in the 1990s. Most of them were sheltered in the refugee camps of Jammu after the forced uprooting from their adored homes in Kashmir. This arrangement of temporary shelter (refugee camps) in Jammu further aggravated their sense of loss rather than

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alleviating it. Kashmir, the home, gradually became a distant, if not an impossible idea for the Pandit community. With the passage of time, this distancing increased, though the eldest generation still considered their displacement as a temporary event and dreamt of a permanent return to Kashmir. The poignant words of Babi, Siddhartha Gigoo's grandmother, make it clear when she says:

> "'We will get to go back…We will go back… Don't you think so? What makes you think we won't? Don't be mad… Have patience and keep hope aflame in your hearts … Hope is our everything now… The only thing we have … The only thing that will keep us alive… This phase won't last more than a few months … The madness will end… By winter, we will be back home… Just in time to welcome the snow…'" (LSA 67)

Unfortunately, the madness that Babi refers to does not end soon. The uprooted Pandits continue to live an 'exiled' life in their own country. Their sufferings in the camps make their experiences even worse. The refugees irrespective of sex and age go through sufferings, which only a person, experiencing similar change from the comforts of home to the miseries of unhealthy refugee camps, can fathom. Their sufferings knew no bounds, the following interview given by the dwellers of the refugee camps to the media pertinently points to their pathetic existence:

> During the monsoons, which last from July until September, we have rain and hail almost every day. It is stormy at night. Tents cave in one after another at night. In the mornings, when the storm abates and the rain stops, people put the tents back up all over again…. There is nobody to go to when our tents collapse. No one comes to help. There is no mechanism to lodge a complaint or grievance. The canvas of these tents is torn and tattered.

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> Not even the ragpickers and recyclers touch them. Such is the condition. Fit to be discarded…'" (LSA 106)

In reality, these tents are discarded by the department of tourism and even the "*kabadi wallah* (scrap dealer)" (LSA 160) won't go for these as Gigoo points out in the memoir. Such use of rejected tents, reveals a sense of apathy, perceived by the Pandit Community in 'exile'.

B. The generation of parents:

While the young generation, of which the author Siddhartha Gigoo is also a representative, is angry with the authorities and at their destiny, the take of the generation of the middle-aged parents of these youths is one of love, hate and compassion tinted with anger. The letters written by Pa, Siddhartha Gigoo's father, to the Kashmiri Muslims, recorded in the entry titled "12 October 2014 Jammu" (LSA 350) and to the Kashmiri Pandits titled as "Letter to Pandits 100 years after the exodus of the 1990 (to be read on 19 January 2090)" (LSA 352) sufficiently reveal the care and concern for homeland in the minds of the generation of parents like Pa. But, at the same time, these letters also reveal a deep sense of loss that haunts and traumatizes them. The following lines from Pa's letter, in which he addresses his descendants, pertinently bring to the fore his generation's regretful realisation of the present scenario of the uprooted Pandit community:

> You are rootless. You belong to no place. The base of your life is a vacuum. The language you speak is not your own. Your festivals are borrowed. You live by proxy. Machines and robots wait upon your parents. You are unaware of your children. You visit other planets. There is a place called Kashmir on this planet. Fly to that place and find your scattered selves there. (LSA 352)

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Pa's pining for Kashmir is apparent in his above-quoted suggestion to the young generation to go to Kashmir to find their lost identity. Again, on 21st January, 2021, that marks the date of completion of 31st year of the Pandit's fleeing from Kashmir, while answering to the question of Barkha Dutt in an interview about how did Pa look back at the at the last 31 years and what was his abiding memory of Kashmir, Pa regrets to share about the hostile attitude of his Muslim friends in this manner, "'In Kashmir, we had a love-hate relationship with the Muslims. But in 1990, everything changed. We saw horror. We saw fear. All the Muslims came out of their homes and started shouting anti-Pandit slogans. We had to run away. Since then, I've been deeply hurt and angry at my Muslim friends. In the context of the same question, Siddhartha's father declares in the same vein to the journalist, "…none of my friendships have survived. I have kissed goodbye to Kashmir. I don't want to go back. Our house is sold. Where do I go and why should I go?" (LSA 353). This touching declaration very effectively summarises the opinion of thousands of Kashmiri Pandits who were forced to leave their home and spend the rest of their lives, in most of the cases, in unhygienic 12x12 size second hand canvas tents without any privacy, which find an unambiguous expression in the memoir as the author writes:

> For the first ten years (1990-2000) in the camp at Udhampur, there weren't any marriages. There was no room for basic things, let alone marriage and married life. There was no privacy in the tents. You can live without privacy for a month, a few months, a year or a couple of years. But imagine living without privacy for twenty years. Women and teenage girls were the worst affected. If you were a married woman, imagine having to share one cramped tent with several male members of the family! You would constantly have your father-in-law, brothers-in-law or other males around you, leaving you with no personal space or privacy. Their mere presence is unsettling. Where do you go in such a situation?

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We may assume that such concerns about lack of privacy and absence of marriage for a decade most probably also indicate a much graver threat posed to the very existence of the Pandit Community perpetuated through the biological act of reproduction. Because of such circumstances, at least some Pandits, irrespective of gender, must have crossed the phase of their life that is biologically the perfect phase for procreation.

C. The present or the author's generation:

The perceived apathy is best exemplified in the context of the plight of the Pandits who are employed in Kashmir under the Prime Minister's Employment Package for the Kashmiri Pandit youths. Under the entry titled "12 May 2022 Kashmir", the author talks about the killing of a Kashmiri Pandit named Rahul Bhat in Budgam. He writes that the young Kashmiri Pandits employed under the scheme "…have been desperately pleading for eight years" (LSA 393) for transfer to a safer place from Kashmir. But unfortunately this "simple plea" (LSA 393) goes unheeded compelling the Pandits employed under this package to "endure the humiliation" (LSA 393) of being treated as 'outsiders' in their own homeland. Siddhartha Gigoo's concern when he asks his readers to just imagine the condition of about 6000 young Kashmiri Pandits engaged in different parts of Kashmir under the prime minister's employment package for Kashmir Pandit migrants is a significant pointer to the vulnerability they are enduring. For Siddhartha Gigoo, the very words – "package" and "migrant", in the PM's scheme of employment, are "inept" and "cruel" (LSA 387). These approximately six thousand young Kashmiri Pandits serving under the special employment scheme are the "children of exile" (LSA 387) who were born in the camps in Jammu that still exist and shelter their parents and grandparents. Such reality prompts Gigoo to raise the pertinent question, "What, then, is home? Where is home? Kashmir, where these youngsters are forced to work as 'package employees' or Jammu, where their parents live in

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camps, longing for a dignified return to the land of their birth and to their ancestral homes?" (LSA 387). This question remains an enigma for the Pandits because though there is an occasional assemblance of the community in 2021 in Srinagar to celebrate Krishna Janmastami, indicative of an "ardent desire to return to their long-lost homeland, from where they were ousted thirty-one years ago" (LSA 383), their hearts are shattered again by the selective killings of Sikhs and Hindus in the valley later in the same year 2021, questioning the legitimacy of their belongingness by separatist elements. The words of Jiji Paul S becomes relevant in this context which go as, "Terrorism has taken the lives of more than 40000 innocent men, women and children. More than three lakh people of the minority community had to flee their homes in the valley and today live as refugees in other parts of their homeland and motherland" (113). Siddhartha Gigoo refers to such killing of religious minorities in the valley as a "language" and goes on to opine that targeted killing of the Pandits is "the only language Pandit-haters have known since 1989" (LSA 386). This is indeed a language of pure hatred which compels Gigoo to further comment in utter helplessness as, "We are the nowhere and no-place people" (LSA 387).

D. Generation Z (Gen Z):

The shock and anger of uprooting make the middle-aged generation of Pandits, including gigoo's father Pa, decide not to go to Kashmir anymore. The sentiment of Pa, when he expresses his reluctance to go back to Kashmir, finds some echo in the youngest generation of Kashmiri Pandits, but for a different reason. Representation of the youngest generation of the Pandit community in the memoir is done through the character of Amia, Siddhartha Gigoo's daughter. Instead of the tryst with their past, it is their grappling with the inter-continental phenomena like globalization and economic liberalization that have taught them much resilience. Acknowledging such changes among the youngest generation of Pandits, Shaleen Kumar Singh aptly comments, "The lifestyle

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of the Pandits has undergone a drastic change. Globalization, privatization and liberalization have transformed their lives. They have accepted newness with open minds….Young boys and girls are exposed to a bigger world of commerce, educational opportunities, science and technology. Peace, mutual cooperation and love have brought about a change in attitudes" (190). Such a change in perception and outlook is apparent in young Amia. In 2022, when the Gigoo family received their domicile certificates, Amia declares her unwillingness to identify with Kashmir as their homeland. She declares, "…I wasn't born there. The address mentioned isn't my address. I was born in Delhi and this is my home now" (LSA 417). Siddhartha Gogoo, being the father of a Gen Z child, was long prepared for such an incident. To counter such indifferent attitude of his daughter Amia, he had written the explanation much earlier which goes like – "I don't want you to remain a 'paper' domicile, like me. My wish for you to is to reclaim your rightful place in Kashmir. Whatever is lost is gone, but whatever exists must be protected from further erosion" (LSA 417). In such a written expression, the utter sense of helplessness of a father in his inability to reclaim Kashmir as a home and the optimism, in all uprooted Kashmiri Pandits, regarding a distant possibility of finding home or redemption of home in coveted Kashmir finds an apt expression.

The above discussion sufficiently points out the fact that home and identity remain elusive ideas for the Kashmiri Pandits after their forced exodus from the Kashmir valley. Through the labyrinth of experiences denoted through the ideas like identity, home, exile, memory, etc. the Kashmiri Pandits try to derive meaning for their beleaguered existence. Gigoo, along with the rest of his community, fully identifies himself with this condition and pertinently puts this precarious situation in the words, "Words like identity, displacement, home, exodus, exile, genocide, camp, refugee, migrant, memory, space, time and hope define us now and give meaning to our lives" (LSA 392). Still, the dream of home is not forgone by the Pandits which is beautifully put by Gigoo

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as, "The dream of home persists. The dream of reclaiming everything that was snatched from us lingers on" (LSA 341). It would perhaps not be inappropriate to conclude that though the idea of home meant everything to the elders who had never wanted to leave Kashmir, their much-coveted home, even for a single day, the opinion of the youngsters is entirely different. While the elders could not tolerate the very idea of physical separation from their home, the new generation has made the necessary mental adjustments for their survival in a place that is, ethnographically speaking, not their own and hence not always accommodative to them. Their attitude to home i.e. Kashmir may be construed to have at least some distant echo in Salman Rushdie's views on homeland, as he puts it in the following words in the context of Mumbai, "…it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 9). The difference between the situation of the Kashmiri Pandits and that of Salman Rushdie is that in the case of the former, the cause of migration is a pushing factor, and that of the latter is a pulling factor that emanated from Rushdie's own volition, as he had left his original homeland in search of better prospects in life. For the Pandits, the loss of Kashmir is a colossal one in that it drags them down from a prosperous position and subjects them to unspeakable mental agony in the refugee camps. Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Season of Ashes* can be termed as an attempt towards resistance against the tendency on the part of some cultural groups with vested interests to prolong the sense of alienation and homelessness emanating out of forced exodus from Kashmir felt by generations of Kashmiri Pandits. While resisting such premeditated designs to permeate the deprivations for the Pandit community, Siddhartha Gigoo does not fail to evoke, with poignancy, their scary flights from the security of home and at the same time the plights of their long journey as 'exiles' in their own country.

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