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## WOMEN IN EXILE: A STUDY IN THE SELECT WRITINGS OF KASHMIRI PANDITS IN EXILE

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### **Abstract:**

The conflict induced displacement of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland in 1990s is an everlasting wound in the history of humanity. The intensive social and psychological damage caused by such mass exoduses have been analysed and interpreted in detail, however, the question of women in exile was long neglected from research. Though both the gender suffers the bitter realities of exile together, women are more vulnerable to oppression, suppression and depression among the refugees. This paper attempts to analyse the writings of Kashmiri Pandits in exile to reread and interpret how the shocking sequence of events in the past coupled with the mass exodus of 1990s have impacted the women. Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma have been analysed in detail to explore a feminine version of exile in order to derive the social, cultural and psychological impacts it had inflicted upon them.

**Keywords:** Victimisation, Trauma, Exile, Rape, Violence, Gender.

The state of exile deeply traumatizes human life in multiple manner since it is a sudden stressful circumstance emerged out of forceful expatriation which separates one from his/her homeland. Exile as a form of displacement in the history of mankind can be defined as the compulsive expulsion of an individual or a group from their land of origin under various extraordinary circumstances such as war, mass exodus, religious execution, predation etc. Exilic conditions, as it is depicted in ancient classics as well as in modern narratives, are quintessentially filled with dishonor, desolation, despair and misery. Edward Said summarizes exile as "...strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (173). The overwhelming impacts of such mass exoduses have been analysed both quantitatively as well as qualitatively; however, the question of women in exile was long neglected from research. Hence, it is critical to include a gender perspective while studying the poetics of memory and trauma associated with exile which further guarantees the representation and recognition of feminine aspects of exile.

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The forced displacement of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland in 1990s is a tragedy in the history of humanity. The traumatic sequence of events associated with the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland not only wounded the immediate victims but also the posterity, through the historical memory of the psyche that functions through both oral and written transmission of personal experiences. Even though the Kashmiri Pandits are neither categorized as refugees nor Internally Displaced Persons but are officially listed as 'migrants', their encounter with issues of place and out of place and their experience of being ignored and peripheralized along with the loss of social, political and economic status makes their exilic experience as traumatic as that of other similarly displaced communities. They underwent and still perceive an experience of a refugee without even getting an official recognition. This paper systematically attempts to focus on the feminine aspects of both exodus and life in exile through analysing the select contemporary writings of Kashmiri Pandits such as Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma.

Though the mass exodus of Pandits had happened particularly in the 1990s, the forced migration associated with religious persecution and proselytization has a long and eventful history. According to the government of India, more than 60000 Kashmiri Pandit families have been registered as refugees out of whom the major portion got resettled in Jammu, Delhi and many other neighboring states. Their exilic narratives deep-rooted in the feeling of victimhood emphasises on their desire for rooted lives which perceives the notions of home, homelessness and the other complex issues associated with the making of a new home. As Ankur Datta points out in his detailed study on displaced Kashmiri Pandits:

What complicates the scene is the fact that more than two decades have passed since their displacement. Many Kashmiri Pandits have rebuilt their lives with varying degrees of success. Yet the sense of loss with displacement persists across generations. There is an inability to make a secure place and home in spite of settlement in physical sense. (21)

The multiple issues associated with the forced displacement of Pandit community such as homelessness, dislocation, the camp life as a refugee, the haunting traumatic memory of physical and mental violence, the cultural and ritualistic social memory of the past etc. have an indispensable gender dimension which has to be addressed since the female experience of these aspects of exile differs significantly from that of men. Unlike Kashmiri Pandit men, the women have faced more disadvantages due to their basically lower social and human capital status which makes them more vulnerable in such historical contexts of victimisation. Either they were direct victims of mental and physical abuse or were living in constant fear of different

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forms of threats and violence as part of growing social and communal tension in the Kashmir valley.

Though many of the Pandit writings in exile adopt the style of holocaust testimonies and memoirs, they differ in the subjects they have dwelled in detail based on their personal and social experiences linked with the events of mass exodus. Rahul Pandita was in his adolescent age when he was forced into a form of permanent exile like a refugee in his own country. As reflected in his memoir, "I knew I was in permanent exile. I could own a house in this city, or any other part of the world, but not in the Kashmir Valley from where my family came"(Pandita7). His first-person narration of events in the form of a memoir has accommodated multiple female voices who are inevitably the quintessential characters in his 'home story'. The home story begins ends and continues through the memory of these female characters like Ma who keeps on repeating it as if it is ingrained in her which reminds her of who she was. As Rahul Pandita puts it:

For God's sake, don't repeat your home story in front of everyone! The home story was a statement that Ma had got into the habit of telling anyone who would listen. It didn't matter to her whether they cared or not. It had become a part of her, entrenched like a precious stone in the mosaic of her identity. (10)

These mothers occupy a significant place in the narration of past which is "...memorialized as if it were a retrievable moral order, filled with still-life images refusing to yield" (Knudsen 19). However, they continue to tell and retell their own stories of home, its loss and the state of permanent exile. The narrator in multiple instances compares their tragedy with that of mass Jewish exodus and the trauma it has created more specifically among the women. The atmosphere of fear and violence, the impending uncertainty about life, safety and self-respect during such holocausts had deeply tortured them socially and culturally leaving them into extreme conditions of psychological trauma. Rahul Pandita provides a thoughtful description of such instances in the following lines:

Women had been herded like cattle into the backs of trucks...In one of the trucks; a woman lifted the tarpaulin sheet covering the back and peered outside. There was nothing peculiar about her except the blankness in her eyes. They were like a void that sucked you in. Years later, I saw a picture of a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz. When I saw his eyes, my mind was immediately transported to that day, and I was reminded of the look in that woman's eye. (98)

These writings succeeded in offering a comprehensive account of the plight of women, their passive and active reactions to the events before and during exile, their victimisation to sexual and emotional abuse. Though the cycle of violence that got perpetuated during the 1990s in the Kashmir valley has impacted both the sexes, some

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form of violence such as sexual violence was gender specific. The vast majority of rape victims and survivors were women. The derogatory slogans with sexual undertones such as “Let the Pandit men leave Kashmir, but let them leave their women behind”(Gigoo 68) were targeted specifically against Pandit women. The question of sexual victimisation of Pandit women has been addressed by Pandita as well when he narrates such violence in the following lines:

A woman howled while walking through a field with a child following her...I was terrified when I saw a thin line of blood running down her thighs where her dress was torn. It was torn near her chest too. But she was oblivious to everything now. (172)

A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits, an anthology of haunting memoirs begins with the testimonial narrative of Indu Bushan Zutshi who through her memoir narrates the brutal rape and murder of innocent Sarla Bhat by accusing her as an informant. The narrative discloses the hypocrisy of militant terrorist groups who primarily targeted on ethnic cleansing of Pandits from the valley. The female body at such crucial occasions of social tragedies becomes the victim of sexual assault and brutality. In such instances, rape emerges out to be a brutal tool in the crime of genocide which functions as a means of psychological warfare to humiliate and traumatise the targeted group. As the narrator puts it:

We were horrified to see the body when it was handed over to Shambu Nath. It was bullet-ridden and covered with blood. There were torture marks all over the body. It became clear to us that she had been violated and sexually assaulted before being killed.(Zutshi 6)

The Pandits distrust and were distrusted. The breaking down of trust among the communities puts the social life on trial. What triggers a community to radically choose exile as a better option than continuing in their own socio-political spectrum is the chronic crisis that directly threatens their existence with both trust and respect. In a commune where trust and respect are absent, women become more vulnerable to physical and moral victimisation. In a wider sense, it can be said that in such circumstances the women are more susceptible to victimhood even before fleeing as a refugee from the society in which they live and continue to be the primary target of exploitation even after receiving an asylum in a new alien space. Moreover, the complex predicament that emerges out of an exilic status has both social and personal dimensions which continue to torment and traumatize the victims in general and women in particular.

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The new world reality that the Pandit women witnessed in their state of exile was neither welcoming nor safe. As Ankur Datta describes, "Everything about Jammu- the city, the architecture, the people, and the climate -was alienating" (68). This hostile environment coupled with the unsafe camp life make the process of victimisation to continue even in the host land. Instead of having a humane approach toward the displaced Pandits, the Jammuites utilized the opportunity to exploit the migrants both socially and economically. The rooms provided for rent were barns, cowsheds and even some ramshackle sheds for a comparatively higher rate. As Gigoo describes in his novel, "Rooms meant just four walls and a roof... They saw Pandits huddled mute in such rooms" (80). Such a limiting space coupled with lack of privacy and over-crowding must have traumatised women life both at moral and mental realm.

The most critical phase in the exilic life of Kashmiri Pandit women is their life at refugee camps which "...has been imagined as a site of exception and as an abnormal place..." (Datta72). In a wider sense, the camp is an exceptional incomparable space of rehabilitation during emergency where rule lessees becomes the rule and unbearable becomes the bearable. What happens in these camps where rule lessness becomes the rule is the deprivation and exploitation of the vulnerable out of which the women suffered the maximum. The writings of Pandits in exile have dealt in detail with these intolerable every day camp life of forced migrants in Jammu.

They repeatedly compare these camps with the Auschwitz concentration camp of Nazi Germany to indirectly suggest an extreme level of victimisation of Pandits in general and women in particular. In the novel *The Garden of Solitude*, the miseries of camp life have been portrayed in detail through Sridar's friend Pamposh who narrates his family's life of agony in the migrant camp. He represents the miserable life that Pandits suffer in the refugee camps which becomes vividly evident when he says with a heavy heart "I wake up hungry and go to bed hungry" (Gigoo 97). He comments on the plight of old women when Pamposh speaks about his grandmother:

My grandmother does not recognise the insects...For hours and hours, she just gazes into a dark nothingness! It is a vacant gaze into a world of oblivion and amnesia...I do not know if she is hungry or thirsty. When asleep, she resembles a corpse...She would be happy in her death, I pray.(Gigoo 98)

When the old women suffer out of their inability to adapt with the new atmosphere of camp life, the young women face more chronic victimisation including lack of privacy and safety. As they remained unsafe in their own homeland, they continue to experience the same victimisation even as refugees in their host land. Even the incidents of rape and

sexual assaults were common in these migrant camps, as in the Kashmir valley, and the victims remain the same. Such atrocities against women were part of exile life in migrant camps where "...women shriek, fall silent and then cry in solace behind the filthy tank" (Gigoo 98). When Pandit women suffered both lack of privacy and safety in these filthy ghettos, they were surrendering their rich legacy of a dignified life in the past that they relished in their homeland. They were only privileged to chant their glorious past: "Our home in Kashmir had twenty-two rooms" (Pandita 11). The narrow space that they got in these camps along with the filthy surroundings made them experience the extremes of despair and deprivation. Pamposh reflects on these terrible circumstances when he says:

My mother and sister wash their clothes and the utensils in a puddle of water outside 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)

The psychological dimension of exile and its impact on women can be traced from these Kashmiri Pandit writings in order to understand the multiple aspects of victimisation. The representation of women characters in these writings suggests the presence of both nostalgic suffering and trauma among them. For women, home is a mental space where one experiences both safety and contentment. Hence, homelessness is a state of mental insecurity and trauma. The emotional wound of the catastrophe along with "the trauma of migration" has resulted in creating PTSDs in their individual psyche. This fundamental framework of trauma studies is evident in the exile writings of Pandits and in their representation of women characters. For instance, Pamposh's grandmother living in "a world of oblivion and amnesia" (98) in Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, Ma in Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* who chants "home story in front of everyone" (9) exemplifies the suffering of subdued female psyche.

The in-depth analysis of representation of women in the select writings of Kashmiri Pandits in exile has revealed that the women's experience and understanding as a refugee is different from that of men. The sequence of intense catastrophic events associated with exodus and the subsequent life in exile has impacted women as women and men as men. Though both the sexes suffered similar forms of harassment, rape and sexual violence were unique female experiences. Even their psychological suffering has a distinct dimension that has elements of nostalgic grief and home bound memories.

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