



A Community in Exile: A Critical Analysis of Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* (2011)

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Abstract

The research paper focuses on Siddhartha Gigoo's novel, *The Garden of Solitude*, dedicated to the people living in exile and their desire for a peaceful state of mind. Siddhartha Gigoo in the novel has highlighted exile as a major theme and *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) tells the story of a community without reflection which has been forgotten by the world. The Kashmiri Pandits lost their reflection when the world turned its face away from their plight and suffering in refugee camps. The absence of reflection also indicates the erasure of identity. The question of Kashmiri Pandits has been excluded from all the dominant discourses and the novel is an endeavour by a Pandit to bring before the world the grim life of refugee camps.

The novel asserts the need to preserve the stories of a community whose elders have lost their fight against failing memories. The protagonist of the novel believes in preserving identity through literary pursuits and that is why he records the stories that connect displaced Pandits to their roots in Kashmir. The concept of identity politics is at major stake here in the novel and the identity of his community has an essential link to its past in Kashmir and that link is personified by the elders living in exile. There is a theme of journey in his life that ultimately takes him back to his roots in Kashmir. The journey is in the search for the lost reflection of his community that he tries to get back by collecting stories slowly fading away.

Keywords: Exile, Kashmir, Pandits, Identity, Cultural politics.



Reduced Inequalities

Siddhartha Gigoo has dedicated his novel, *The Garden of Solitude*, to the people living in exile and their desire for a peaceful state of mind: "All I dream of now is a garden of solitude, where I get a morsel of rice in the morning and a morsel of rice in the evening". (Gigoo, 2011, p. V) An exile only hopes for a peaceful physical place and a mental space through which he or she can escape his/her anxieties, confusions, struggles, and pain of life in exile. Life in exile is a state of

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hopelessness and homelessness. The pain of being in exile makes him or her desire not the luxuries of life but a simple life in which one can be at peace with oneself and have just the right amount of food to survive. One wishes to run away from restlessness and despair to some peaceful abode, untouched by any psychological wounds. The novel is about Kashmiri Pandits who were forced by the circumstances in 1990 to live in exile and go through the pain of being rootless and homeless and even through the dark lanes of memory loss. The exiles, living in the refugee camps in Jammu, went through immense physical and mental injuries. Leaving behind the cool lap of Kashmir valley, the Kashmiri Pandits landed up in the cruel and unbearable heat of Jammu to face extremely unfavorable conditions.

The prologue of the novel contains a glimpse of the happy past that the Kashmiri Pandits experienced in the Valley. It carries a small incident related to the great-grandmother of Sridar, the protagonist of the novel. The great grand grandmother, Poshkuj, died at the age of ninety, eight years after her husband Gulabju's death. It happened in the winter of 1981 when the family was celebrating *Gada Bhata*, a Kashmiri Pandit festival. When Poshkuj died with a fishbone stuck in her throat, there was a smile on her face. It was a peaceful death in a place where she belonged and she was cremated where she had spent most of her life, Pampore. The prologue talks about celebrations in the families of Kashmiri Pandits. Poshkuj had a knack for storytelling and after her death, her daughter-in-law, Gowri, took over the responsibility of keeping the tradition of storytelling alive: "Gowri was a great raconteur. She brought the images to life through the words she wove and the deft gesticulations she made" (xiii). One of the incidents Gowri told very fondly was about Poshkuj's encounter with a lion in her father's orchard when she slapped the lion like a goddess. The incident was described by Gowri as some kind of duel. The prologue sets the tone for the novel by describing the importance of storytelling as a way of keeping one's tradition and history alive. Through the art of storytelling, memories can be transferred from one generation to another. If a generation becomes forgetful, the vital link between the past and the future fades away. The exile forced upon the Kashmiri Pandits gradually eroded their memories; those who were directly connected to the past in the Valley either died in the claustrophobic refugee camps or lost their memories. The new generation lost the essential link between their present and the past and there was no way to know about their ancestors. The prologue ends with a mention of an effort by Poshkuj's great-grandson, Sridar, to recollect the past through his book, *The Book of Ancestors*.

The novel is written in the third person narrative and traces the life of its protagonist, Sridar, who goes through various experiences until he finally finds the purpose of his life. The novel starts with the tales of friendship between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits and also the family history of Sridar. It also mentions the opposition that existed between the two communities in the Valley before the trust between them got a final, fatal blow in the late eighties with the eruption of insurgency. The insurgency disseminates a sense of insecurity and fear among the Kashmiri Pandits. Sridar lives in the house of his grandfather Mahanandju, a few minutes away from the bank of river Jhelum called Yarbhal, on the Nalla-e-Maer Road. The house is the largest in the locality and Sridar has a peaceful and comfortable life in this house. His room is full of books and often he would look out of the "stained glass window" of his room to catch a glimpse of falling snow (9). There is a willow tree in the courtyard of the house planted by Mahanandju which survives even the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits. From the house, Sridar can see *Eidgah* and also settlements of the Tibetan refugees that stand like a microcosm of co-existence in Kashmir. One

of the windows also gives the view of a graveyard which becomes an important place in the Valley, especially after the beginning of insurgency. The deaths in the Valley make the graveyard a busy place. The window of his recurs many times in the imagination of Sridar while living in exile. The refugee camps where Sridar and other Pandits live after being displaced from Kashmir are living spaces without doors and windows. The only view that is available behind the crumbling curtains of refugee tents is that of a sordid and stagnant life.

Sridar's grandfather, Mahanandju, is defined as a man of simplicity who shares a strong bond with his Muslim friends. Mahanandju holds dear a wooden chest which contains personal things, some related to his father Gulabju, about which nobody knows. But it is like a box filled with memories, preserved for posterity. Mahanandju is respected by everyone in his locality and is fondly called "Doctor Sahib" by his neighbours because he knows the art of healing bone diseases that he learned from Gulabju (2). Gulabju was a learned man who had learned Sanskrit from scholars. He was married to Poshkuj for eight years when he went into a "self-imposed exile" for eighteen years (3). While living as an exile, Gulabju shared his experiences through letters with his son. The exchange of letters is a very effective tool used by Siddhartha Gigoo throughout the novel to connect people distanced due to exile. Gulabju's exile is about his quest for knowledge and his letters carry the essence of his explorations in the world, with not a word about the pain of being away from the home. On the other hand, the letters written by his grandson and great-grandson to each other and friends are infused with loss, the pain of being rootless, and the anxieties of a forced migrant.

Initially, Sridar's awareness, as a teenager, about the difference between the Kashmiri Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits, is only limited to the sides taken during the cricket match played between India and Pakistan. He observes that the Kashmiri Pandits support the Indian team and the Muslims' loyalty lies with the Pakistani team. The ritual of circumcision in Muslims makes Sridar nervous and he is relieved to think that he is not a Kashmiri Muslim. As an individual, Sridar finds immense solace in writing which he started at a very young age. He is encouraged by his father, Lasa, to write and read. He spends his days in solitude, working on the first essay of his life. There are blank moments when he is unable to write even a single word and then there comes flashes of immense creativity that fill his life. Sridar aspires to be a writer and he prepares for this role by maintaining a journal and brushing up his reading habits. He "imagine[s] the impossible", plays with words and imageries, and travels into his dreams and sometimes into a dream within a dream (6).

Sridar's winter vacation gives him enough time to expand his creative pursuits. There is nothing much to do in winters in the Valley and Sridar and his family keep themselves indoors, most of the time. The novel describes the Valley as it appears in winter with the warmth of *kangris* that help the Kashmiris survive the cold conditions without electricity for days together. When the Valley wears a white blanket, the Kashmiris stay indoors most of the time and take a bath once a month because of the paucity of fuel. But nothing about winters makes Kashmiris uncomfortable because it has with it the warmth of home. During "long, cold and lifeless" winters, Sridar confines himself to his room where he enjoys reading books (10). After winters, spring takes Sridar to Pampore where he spends time with his grandparents. There he plays with his cousins in the saffron fields, rests under a Chinar tree, steals apples from the attic, and listens to the stories from elder cousins. The love for stories, along with memory and dreams, has a special place in Sridar's life. As the trip gets over, the memories of the village make him nostalgic and he starts dreaming

of another holiday in Pampore.

After describing peaceful days in the life of Sridar through seasons, the novel shifts to the early years of insurgency that led to the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. The novel presents the life of Professor Wakhlu from whom Sridar used to take tuition for Mathematics. One day Billa Puj, a goon and brother of the militant Majid, comes to meet the Professor with some other boys. The meeting makes the Professor so tense that he dismisses all the tuition classes for the day and tells his students to take a holiday the next day. The next day the Professor and his wife are not seen anywhere but a note is found: "My wife and I had to leave to be with our son. We will be back in a month. Till then, continue your studies" (13). But they never return like many other Pandits who leave after them. The uncertainty and changes in the air of the Valley continue to engulf the lives of Kashmiri Pandits. Unaware of the real circumstances, Sridar gets happy to know about the absence of the Professor, thinking about not attending his tuition for some time. Soon the disappearance of the Professor creates fear among other Pandit Professors. Sridar's friend, Anil, tells him that everyone fears the visit of Bila Puj to their houses now as such 'visits' bring with them warnings and threats to the Kashmiri Pandits.

Sridar's parents and grandparents share good relations with their Muslim neighbours. In the house that faces his own life Abdul Gani and his wife Shaha with their two sons, Mukhtiar and Basharat. Abdul Gani has a great respect for Mahanandju and Sridar's grandmother is good friends with Shaha. As a grave digger, Abdul looks after graveyards by maintaining beautiful gardens in them. After getting separated from his brother Afsal, also a grave digger, Abdul comes to seek Mahanandju's help in convincing people to choose him over Afsal as the grave digger. It is because of the reputation and respect that Mahanandju has earned amongst the Kashmiri Muslims that his words carry such importance. Abdul is assured help by Mahanandju: "I will certainly put in a good word for you. Those who rightfully belong to you while alive will surely belong to you after death. Who can change destiny?" (16). Mahanandju laughs over this "division of living and dead", unaware of the coming schism between Muslims and Pandits of Kashmir (16). Later that night, Mahanandju sees a dream in which Abdul warns him of a rebellion against India in the Valley:

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 children, and 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. (17)

In the dream, Abdul alerts Mahanandju that Pandits should either join the movement or leave Kashmir as he is very optimistic about the independence of Kashmir and the victory of Muslims—"the sufferers" (17). Siddhartha Gigoo has very subtly incorporated his view that even common Muslims tried to influence Pandits to either join them or leave the Valley. It is important to take note of the word 'sufferers' used in the dream as it talks about the sense of victimhood among the Kashmiri Muslims. One reads in the novel that anti-India sentiments were present in the Valley before the 1980s as well. The grandfather of Lasa's Muslim friend Ali used to see India as an agency of "oppression and imperialism" and believed that the successive Indian governments had crushed the aspirations of Kashmiris (64). According to Sumantra Bose, Kashmiris were expected to be loyal to the Indian state, and their democratic aspirations were ignored, which resulted in "mass Kashmiri alienation" and "total and violent rejection of the Indian state" (40). The people of

Kashmir, who “developed a renewed commitment to the idea of ‘self-determination’ by the late 1980s sincerely believe that they have given India’s democracy more than its fair share of chances” (Bose 51). Moreover, as it is through the dream of a Kashmiri Pandit that the novel incorporates the aspiration of Kashmiri Muslims to be free from suffering, it suggests that the Kashmiri Pandits were well aware of this ‘victimhood’. Mahanandju shares this dream with his wife Gowri but both of them are reluctant to believe any bit of it as their faith in the friendship with the Kashmiri Muslims is very strong. So, friendship on one side and a hidden awareness about the feelings of Muslims on the other side existed simultaneously in the heart of the Kashmiri Pandits.

The people of Kashmir, both Muslims and Pandits, started fearing militants--people from *Tanzeem*. Even Ali, once, pretends to be a militant with a gun under his *pheran* to get free oranges from a hawker. On the one hand, militants are feared and on the other, they are also supported by the Kashmiri Muslims. There is a feeling amongst Kashmiri Muslims that they cannot betray the cause of freedom and that they need to give support to the militants. As a result, the dust of mistrust and doubt slowly envelops the Valley and both the communities. The Kashmiri Pandits start accepting that it will be their last winter in Kashmir. Amidst these changing equations, many of them start thinking about leaving Kashmir to save their lives but Lasa calls everything a mistake on the part of Muslims which he feels will be realized and amended soon. Lasa’s faith in the coexistence keeps him hopeful about improvement in the situation. If there is hope on one side, then on the other side secrets continue to make their way into the hearts and houses of the Kashmiri Muslims.

In no time, Shaha’s words turn into a reality when Abdul loses both his sons in the insurgency. Basharat gets killed while crossing the border into “Azad Kashmir” while Mukhtiar dies in crossfire while pelting stones at an army convoy. Mukhtiar is hailed as the “youngest freedom fighter” in the locality, bringing more light to the stand of the Kashmiri Muslims on insurgency (26). The lives of Abdul and Shaha become desolate with the death of their sons. Losing young boys and their funeral processions become a regular scene in the Valley. With more boys dying, new graves emerge in the Valley: “A portion of land at Eidgah was converted into a graveyard and named the ‘Freedom Graveyard’” (26). The graveyards become, in the words of Navnita Chadha Behera, the “places of pilgrimage” for the Kashmiri Muslims (150). When changes become visible in the streets and graveyards, the Kashmiri Pandits become more suspicious about the situation.

Gigoo has created many humanistic moments in his novel to highlight the possibility of love between the two communities. The novel dwells upon stories of coexistence while unfolding the incidents of fear and mistrust in the Valley. The bond between Pandits and Muslims also reflects itself in small caring gestures like that of Bilal Khor, the goon of the neighbourhood and son of a tongawala, who treats Sridar like a brother. The Kashmiri Pandits used to participate in the celebration of Eid with their Muslim friends. Although Sridar does not like the sight of blood during the slaughtering of sheep, he loves to go to Eidgah with his grandfather, Mahanandju, who has many Muslim friends:

Mahanandju would stop at his friends’ shops in the neighbourhood. Gota, the maker of kites and pinwheels; Qadir Goor, the milkman; Juma Saecz, the tailor; and Shambu Nath, the tobacconist, who sold exquisite tobacco and items meant for Pandit’s rituals and ceremonies. . . . Mahanandju was most friendly with Juma Saecz, at whose shop he sat and talked about the affairs of the locality. (30)

As the freedom struggle grows in intensity, the days of love and friendship are replaced with suspicion: "The Pandits became suspects—informers and agents of India" (32). The situation gets more strained in the winter when the Kashmiri Muslim youth start expressing their anger against the Indian domination through stones, bricks, and gravel. The common Kashmiri Muslims start raising slogans of freedom and the songs of freedom are broadcast and memorized. Every Muslim youth starts aspiring to become a freedom fighter: "The Kalashnikov rifles that had been buried in the kitchen gardens in the previous season were exhumed by the militants and distributed to the boys who wanted to join the uprising and be part of the resistance against the rule" (34). As the gun battle between militants and Indian forces becomes fierce, a change is noticed by the Kashmiri Pandits that confirms the pro-Pakistan stand of militants: "The time in all the watches and clocks was turned backward by half an hour [the time difference between India and Pakistan]" (36). The life shuts down as curfews and hartals, called by militants, become a regular part of Srinagar. As curfew takes over Sridar's neighbourhood, life becomes strange as now people are forced not by winters but by curfews to stay indoors.

A vicious circle of deaths, disappearances, stone pelting, and crossfire starts in Kashmir. The Pandits stop coming out of their houses and the windows of their houses remain shut. There are posters glued to the walls, lamp posts, and the doors of some Pandit houses that add to their fear: "'All non-believers and informers are given thirty-six hours to leave this place. Those who fail to obey will be sawed'" (emphasis added) (40). According to Navnita Chadha Behera, Kashmiris had never resisted the foreign rule valiantly and that is why militants turned to "Islam's sanction of violence" for a new rationale to justify their struggle as a struggle for justice (150). She further mentions that although the word '*jihad*' was not used yet the militants did call themselves *mujahideen* and used themes of *jihad*:

While Hizb-ul-Mujahideen is generally credited with injecting Islamic formulations into the movement, the JKLF was already using such themes in its mobilization strategies and public discourse. Its organizational resources were used by the Jamaat-i-Islami cadre, and in turn, the former used the Friday *namaz* (prayer congregation) at the Jama Masjid to mobilize public support. Popular slogans such as "Azadi ka matlabkya, La Illahilillah" (Freedom means the rule of Islamic law) and "Hum kyachahet hai Nizam-i-Mustafa" (What do we want - Islamic law) used Islam and independence interchangeably. (150)

As Islamization of the insurgency sets in, the Kashmiri Pandits in the novel start hiding their identity in front of anyone: "The Pandit women stopped putting *tilaks* on their foreheads to mask their identity. The men grew beards. ... They abandoned their traditional greeting 'Namaskar'" (39). Their identity becomes a threat to their lives as the stories of Pandits being killed start pouring in from all sides. Doctor Leelawati is killed in Mattan along with her husband for not obeying the diktat of militants regarding not charging any fee from militants. Her mangled remains and the body of her husband shot with bullets are found later. It is said that the bodies of Doctor Leelawati and her husband are cremated by their Muslim neighbours. But these incidents of violence terrorize Pandits so much that even the acts of kindness on the part of Kashmiri Muslims fail to stop them from leaving the Valley. The killings of the Pandits are meant to send a message to the whole community, which is now seen as the representative of the Indian state in the novel. Rekha Chowdhary writes in her book *Jammu and Kashmir: Politics of Identity and Separatism* about the killing of the Pandits by the militants in Kashmir: "There were killing of other Kashmiri Pandits also on the ground that they were seen as 'Indian agents' and 'informers'.

All these killings had the impact on the community and they felt 'targeted'" (125). She also mentions that although Muslims were also killed on the same ground, it was the "fundamentalist agenda" of some militant organizations that made the Pandits feel unsafe (125). For Tej K Tikoo, author of *Kashmir: Its Aborigines and Their Exodus*, the motive of the militants was to "'[k]ill one and scare one thousand' to instill fear" in the Kashmiri Pandits (429).

The Muslim neighbours start believing in the idea of freedom struggle and the price it demands. The seriousness of the struggle is measured in terms of the number of killings of the representatives of the Indian state. The hit lists issued by militants started appearing on the scene frequently. The importance and seriousness of the hit lists can be judged from the strange response of Muslim youth to the death of Amarnath, the retired lecturer: "'He should not have been killed. His name was not in the hit list. I checked. It is a mistake. Maybe, some boys from a different outfit did this. May God forgive them!'" (42). Instead of mourning the dead, people discoursed on the appropriateness of the death. The various outfits choose their own targets, each thinking itself to be at the center of the struggle. As mentioned by Pannalal Dhar in his book *Ethnic Unrest in India and Her Neighbours*, the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) was the only military outfit by 1989 with the aim to make Kashmir free but soon "Pakistan involved itself more actively in Kashmir to make the movement pro-Pakistan" (277). The Indian government continued to see it only as the handiwork of Pakistan and ignored the presence of support of common Kashmiri Muslims in the movement.

It is believed 95 percent of the migration [of the Kashmiri Pandits] took place between 20 January 1990 and 23 January 1990, when mosques blared anti-India slogans and several Kashmiri Pandits received threatening letters from militants, warning them to vacate their houses as they were to be used as hideouts. (345)

After the night of announcements from mosques, Pandits start avoiding stepping out of their houses as there is a striking change in the attitude of their Muslim neighbours. Razaq to whose house Lasa goes to get his television repaired shouts anti-India statements loudly to convince militants in the street that he is with the movement: "'I was simply acting. The boys are on the street. I am safe now'" (43). But the novel throws suspicion around the whole incident as it is mentioned: "His [Razaq's] acting was perfect" (43). It is difficult to find out whether it is some pretense or the real emotions of the Kashmiri Muslims as the air of secrecy becomes heavier with each passing day.

The novel includes many instances that express the support shown by the common Kashmiri Muslims to the freedom movement in the Valley led by militants. The militants who die are metamorphosed by the people into heroes and their deaths into sacrifices for the much-awaited freedom. A young Muslim boy in Sridar's neighbourhood talks about being courageous in death. In the novel, the militants hidden in a mosque when killed by the Indian Security Forces are given grand funerals by the people. The announcements from the mosques hail the martyrdom of young Muslims and women wish for more sons, who can sacrifice their lives for *azadi*: "Freedom was the only word on the lips of people" (44). Jagmohan in his book *My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir* states that the various militant organizations wanted to turn mosques into "centres of revolution" by taking over their control (401). Apart from mentioning the use of mosques to circulate information, gather crowds, indoctrinate masses, and coordinate functioning, Jagmohan also points out: "In the event of death of any 'freedom fighter', special funeral prayers were held in big mosques and the occasion was used to make inflammatory speeches to whip up mass hysteria"

(401). The novel describes how amidst cries of freedom, the Kashmiri Pandits turn into “mere terrified spectators” (45) and keep themselves away from the “inane struggle for the liberation of Kashmir” (47). They fear that militants will cut off their neighbourhood from other areas to block the passage of Indian armed forces. They also start believing that their Muslim neighbours will never come to their rescue in case of any militant attack. As fear and suspicion take over the entire neighbourhood, Lasa is asked by a Pandit neighbor not to trust Muslims anymore: “There is some mischief lurking in the Muslims, who claim to be our well-wishers” (46). However, Lasa is reluctant to give up hope and thinks that the ongoing “hysteria” will not last long (46).

If on the one side, the Kashmiri Pandits in the novel are no longer in a position to postpone their departure, then on the other, Kashmiri Muslims continue to nurture a belief that freedom is around the corner: “. . . three more days and Kashmir will be free!” (57). Christopher Snedden calls the years 1988-1993 Phase 1 of the Kashmir conflict, the years that were full of euphoria of freedom for Kashmiri Muslims: “Initially, from 1988-1993, many Kashmiris had a great hope and optimism—indeed, a euphoric expectation—that their popular and initially successful anti-India struggle would quickly succeed” (241). But the euphoria died soon and the movement reached a point of exhaustion after the Indian state came down heavily on the militants and the movement.

While writing about the involuntary departure of the Pandits in the novel amidst such killings, Gigoo mentions that some of them think that they will return soon while others find no point of return:

The next day many Pandit families in the locality deserted their houses and left quietly at dawn. Some carried the household belongings, leaving no trace behind. Others left everything untouched in their homes carrying a hope to return soon. (60)

The second part of the novel starts with Lasa’s arrival in Jammu. There is chaos, confusion, and a flood of Pandits everywhere. Those who had already reached Jammu enquired about the condition of Pandits in the Valley from the newly arrived Pandits. Everyone is directionless and starts taking refuge either in temples or in refugee camps. Some of the Pandits are later allotted canvas tents erected in a cricket stadium on the outskirts of the city. The city does not have enough infrastructure to accommodate the sudden influx of people. The displaced people always find it difficult to get a place in the centre of a new city as most of the time they are seen as a burden on the limited resources. The crisis of Pandits becomes an economic opportunity for the locals of Jammu, who start selling Kashmiri tea and lavasas to Pandits. The displacement brings with it a lot of questions about identity as Lasa struggles with abrupt changes in his life: “Lasa was not able to make up his mind whether such an act of mass migration was a sign of cowardice or great strength and courage” (72).

There is strangeness in the new place for the Pandits: “The houses here seem to have lost their roofs” (71). Although the similarity in religion is there, the difference in language and living is also clearly visible. In the camps, lives are devoid of peace and nights are full of “dreamless sleep” (73). In the government school camp, the Pandits set up a “makeshift kitchen” hoping for some help from the government soon (75). There is waiting on all sides- waiting for government help, waiting for things to be normal, and waiting to return home, especially among the elderly Pandits: “The waiting kept the old from stumbling into oblivion” (75). The Kashmiri Pandits had tried to bring as many things as possible for survival:

Old and mangled electric wiring peeled from the walls of their old house, broken switches, bulbs, lanterns, keys, clogs, idols, photos of grandparents, ornaments, a huge stone mortar,

a pestle, a radio, a winnower, a broom, hand fans made of dried willow stems, empty brass vessels and some strings. (75)

Now, for Pandits, it is only the question of survival till the situation gets back to normal, which many of them hope for. But what the Kashmiri Pandits think now to be a temporary displacement soon turns into a permanent condition in the novel. Many Kashmiri Pandit families fled the Valley in 1990 thinking it to be a temporary phase: "Most of them had left the valley in panic and confusion, hoping that situation would normalise, enabling them to return to their homes soon. Days, months, and years rolled by, but their hopes remained unfulfilled" (Tikoo 485). The temporary refugee camp, made in the government school, in the novel is a place where the nightmare of exodus continues to spread its tentacles:

There was only one block of latrines for the entire school. The stench was appalling. The sweeper kept away and did not show up for days together. The men went reluctantly to the stinking latrines to relieve themselves. Some women covered their noses with the ends of their sarees and took with them buckets full of soil to cover the feces. There were others who refused to use the latrines. The faucets ran dry. The stray dogs were all around. (75).

A more appropriate term for 'refugee in their own country' can be 'Internally Displaced People':

Internally displaced persons are people or groups of people "who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence in particular as a result, or in order to avoid the effect of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border". (Malhotra 71)

Unlike refugees, the Internally Displaced Persons do not cross international borders and that is why Kashmiri Pandits cannot be called refugees. Various Kashmiri Pandit organizations have demanded that "Kashmiri Pandits living in Exile be given proper nomenclature of Internally Displaced Persons and all facilities recommended for this category of refugee be provided to them" ("Displaced Kashmiri Pandits"). These organizations raised their voices and demands in front of "United Nations Military Observatory Group (UNMOG) Sainik Colony Jammu" on 20 June 2010 and hailed it as World Refugee Day ("Displaced Kashmiri Pandits"). The Kashmiri Pandits in the novel are Internally Displaced Persons who are forced to live in tattered conditions without basic facilities for survival. While getting themselves registered, the displaced Pandits are asked to write their permanent addresses in Kashmir and also the dates of migration and arrival.

As the novel turns to the stories of survival and regeneration, Sridar becomes the focus of the narrative. Sridar goes to Delhi, but unable to get admission to a film-making course, he finds a job in a newspaper. With faith in his writing and creativity, he decides to stay in Delhi and start afresh and leave behind all dejection. In the third part of the novel, the individual quest of Sridar's life in the metropolitan and alien city of Delhi takes center stage. Siddharth Gigoo briefly portrays the professional career of his transformed protagonist from a young boy, coming to terms with his personality, to a man who understands the philosophy of life. Sridar finds accommodation in a migrant camp in New Delhi. His roommates are also young Kashmiri Pandits earning their livelihood in the claustrophobic metropolitan of India. A part-time job with a filmmaker, who makes documentaries, allows Sridar to work on a film related to terrorism. He is given the job of translating Kashmiri scripts into English for which he reads various documents related to militancy, terrorism, and people killed and disappeared in the conflict. The documentary also sheds light on the pain of Kashmiri Pandits in the migrant camps of Jammu.

A new dimension is added to his creative instincts when Sridar meets Lenin, a part-time assistant to the filmmaker, and gets to know the vast world of movies and literature and even joins a part-time course in filmmaking. Lenin is passionate about films and books and reads not for recreation but to get a deeper understanding of the books and the characters. Years later he made his first film on the trials of West Bengal and gets his fame. Even Sridar dreams of making a film someday and visualizes a scene etched deeply in his heart—a truck carrying thousands of displaced Pandits. He also has a desire to make a film about pain and suffering and wishes to find a way to deal with the “uncertain truths of this world” (154).

On his journey to Ladakh, he reads his father’s letter which reflects on the lives of displaced Pandits. The novel introduces letters at various moments to connect two estranged communities, bring out the deepest fears and feelings, and hint towards a possibility of peace and coexistence in the future. A story is told by Lasa’s friend, a postmaster and writer in Jammu, of another postmaster who writes letters to himself as his own post office does not receive any letters. The story becomes symbolic of the community of Kashmiri Pandits which is forgotten by the world. The postmaster in the story sorts the self-written letters and takes them home. Gradually he becomes insane and is unable to recognize himself, his wife, his home, and his post office. He loses sense of time and one day he disappears. When his wife opens all the letters, she only finds blank sheets. The feeling of being forgotten and abandoned and the pretense of normalcy gradually defeat a person and community physically and mentally. The metaphor of letters highlights the need for reaching out and sharing pain which is absent in a conflict zone and also the attitude of the world towards people caught in a conflict. The exchange of letters between Ali and Lasa, and Sridar and Lasa in the novel creates a space where fears, hopes, and friendship are shared. It becomes an intangible platform where the past is remembered, the present is painfully presented and the future is visualized.

In his letter to Sridar, Lasa writes about the vacuum he feels in his life. The letter carries the painful lives of the Pandits who have forgotten all the desires and the warmth of love and have aged suddenly. The old Pandits like Mahanandju are losing memory and dying in the hope of seeing their home back in Kashmir. Shedding light on the health problems faced by the displaced Pandits, Seema Shekhawat writes:

More than 8000 displaced people died prematurely during the first 10 years of displacement. The causes of death have been exposure to the hostile environment, snake bites, heat stroke, heart problems and other ailments. . . . The problems that have become common among the camp dwellers are heat stroke, dengue fever, malaria, dysentery, jaundice, allergies, tuberculosis, bronchial asthma, pneumonia, and skin diseases like scabies. Stress-related diabetes has also become rampant among displaced people of even a young age. This has not only adversely affected the productive years of their lives, but also has led to impotency in many cases. Psychological and metabolic stress, coupled with other factors, has also led to a sharp rise in deaths and a decline in the birth rate. Other psychological disorders that have become rampant include depression, hypertension, insomnia, nightmares, hysteria, schizophrenia, and phobias. (“Conflict Induced” 36-37)

Lasa, in his letter, tells Sridar not to forget their roots and pass on their stories from one generation to another: “You must remember to look back and reflect on our journey. Someday, you will have to search for the shreds of your identity, your essence, and your own history” (158). The process of revisiting his past starts with Sridar’s awareness of his real quest for life. His journeys to

Allahbad, Ladakh, and then finally to Kashmir bring him closer to questions of identity. He writes a beautiful reply to his father Lasa that brings out the artist and dreamer in him. After finishing his letter, Sridar continues his journey to Ladakh where the vast emptiness of Ladakh intrigues and enchants his soul and he longs for a company. The sense of permanent marginalization, which engenders from the refugee camps on the fringes of Jammu and from being on the peripheries of the world's memory, always creates an emptiness in Sridar's heart that longs for a friend. He visits monasteries and meets Buddhist monks with whom he discusses various questions about life. While attempting to understand the goal of life, the meaning of freedom and love, he is told by a Lama that love means to have no desire in life. The novel is a creative expression of the experiences of Kashmiri Pandits but it also creates another creative space within it in the form of letters. It is a space where not only Pandits but Muslims also ink their side of the story. Siddhartha Gigoo has tried to incorporate the pain of both communities in his novel. Ali writes in his letter about young boys joining the armed struggle and the power the Indian security forces have in the Valley to kill anybody suspected of being a militant. He feels that Kashmiri Muslims are betrayed by everyone—the government, the army, and even agencies claiming to be their good-wishers (175): "It is the land they want Lasa, not our hearts" (175). Freedom has still not dawned and there are stories of loss everywhere. There are crackdowns, disappearances, sleepless nights, and hopelessness: "The Kashmir which once was ours is burning" (177). Ali speaks about the loss in the novel: "[B]y losing you [Kashmiri Pandits] Kashmir lost its soul" (178). Sridar's father summarizes the pain of Kashmir by saying that the Kashmiri Pandits have lost their elders (in exile) and the Kashmiri Muslims their children (179).

Throughout his journey to revisit his roots, Sridar tries to pick familiar traces from Kashmir. He can leave behind in the world the stories he is collecting and in the process does not mind leaving some childhood tokens back in the room of his Kashmir house: "If it [a painting] has survived in my old room for fifteen years, it can very well last a lifetime there. Some things are not meant to be uprooted" (238). Some traces left behind by the Kashmiri Pandits in the Valley are indelible. These traces will keep Pandits connected to the Valley literally and metaphorically. In the epilogue of the novel, Sridar's book, *The Book of Ancestors*, is released in Jammu on the commemoration of the Martyrs' Day, "the day on which they [the Kashmiri Pandits] remembered the first Pandit who was killed in Kashmir" (241). The exile has not ended but it has turned Sridar into a curator of the past. The Kashmiri Pandits are still away from their garden of solitude—Kashmir-- but people like Sridar are trying to create a space that can provide peace to their homeless souls.

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