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*Displacement, Memory, and a Longing for the Lost Paradise:
A Study of Siddhartha Gigoo's The Garden of Solitude*

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DISPLACEMENT, MEMORY, AND A LONGING FOR THE LOST PARADISE: A STUDY OF SIDDHARTHA GIGOO'S *THE GARDEN OF SOLITUDE*

BASHARAT SHAMEEM

Abstract. The armed conflict in Kashmir has brought enormous suffering to its people. There is hardly anyone who has not felt the debilitating effects of the conflict directly or indirectly. The magnitude of the suffering of Kashmiri people living under the shadows of the conflict is immeasurable. Of late, there has been a steady rise in the number of indigenous writers from Kashmir who are striving to document the tragic stories that emanate from the conflict. These writers are bringing fresh insights about the reality by rendering the untold stories. I shall explore the debut novel of one such writer—*The Garden of Solitude*, published in 2011, by Siddhartha Gigoo. I aim to analyse how the novel documents the tragic story of Kashmiri Pandits' exodus from the valley as a result of the militancy. I aim to draw attention towards how the writer is attempting to give voice to a people who are facing homelessness and threats to their identity.

Keywords: Siddhartha Gigoo, Garden of Solitude, displacement, memory, longing

Siddhartha Gigoo was born in Srinagar in 1974 to a Kashmiri Hindu couple. Kashmiri Hindus are generally known as Pandits and constitute the prominent minority group in an otherwise largely Muslim majority region of the valley of Kashmir. For the first fifteen years of his life, Gigoo lived in Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir and a historic city. Then, in 1990, he and his family migrated from the valley as a result of the rise of militancy against the Indian rule and the concomitant threats issued by militants to the valley's non-Muslim population. *The Garden of Solitude* is Gigoo's debut novel.

At the centre of action in the novel is its protagonist, Sridar. The first part of the narrative is set in the 1980s, the decade preceding the era of the insurgency in Kashmir. It describes Sridar's peaceful life in his ancestral home in the downtown area of Srinagar. It was a relatively peaceful time in Kashmir when "children had complete freedom to play in the saffron fields and the orchards" (Gigoo, 11). Both Hindus and Muslims shared a harmonious social and cultural co-existence, so much so that it was difficult to identify a Muslim from a Hindu as both the communities "abandoned themselves to revelry and celebration" on each other's festivals (ibid.). Their bonding symbolised the age-old traditions of plurality and toleration that defined Kashmir's socio-cultural milieu. However, things

changed dramatically with the rise of militancy in the valley when militants targeted some of the prominent members of the Pandit community. Fearing persecution at the hands of militants as “fear ruled their hearts” (Gigoo, 32), Pandits preferred to move to safer havens. Sridar’s family, like other Pandits, was completely shattered by this rapid change of circumstances. Initially, they were torn between migrating and staying on. Eventually, they decided to move to Jammu where temporary refugee camps had been set up for them by the Indian government. Sridar is shown growing up in one such camp. Afterwards, he moves to Delhi for higher education, and also finds a job there. His work provides him the opportunity to visit the US where he gathers stories of his migrant Pandit community. In this connection, he re-visits his ancestral home in Srinagar. This property had been sold by his father to a Muslim family. In endeavouring to document his community’s struggles in the face of militancy, Sridar’s efforts bear fruition with the publication of his book symbolically titled *The Book of Ancestors*.

In describing Sridar’s efforts to capture his past, Gigoo condenses dreams as longings for a lost homeland, by recreating memories flitting constantly between past and present reality, and by depicting various forms of dislocation. Fearing that the legacy of his community would be lost forever, Gigoo thinks it essential to document the tragedy of the Pandit community by giving voice to its experiences in *The Garden of Solitude*:

The Kashmiri Pandit story did not exist anywhere. The migrants and their stories did not appear in most news items related to Kashmir. There were no statistics, no

pictures of the dead and the dilapidated Pandit houses, no accounts of brutalities on Pandits in Kashmir, no record of disease in the migrant camps. There were no stories of people's past. There were no memories of ancestors. There was no remembrance of a generation which had lived in Kashmir. Sridar aspired to capture the recollections of the people who still remembered their stories and ancestors. (Gigoo, 196)

The Garden of Solitude also has references to the impact of military oppression on Kashmiri Muslims but the thrust of the narrative pertains to the Kashmiri Pandits in the form of their exodus and homelessness. In the novel, this is reflected in the words of a character named Rupesh Zadoo, a Kashmiri Pandit: "The militants and their demand for freedom from India are only half-truth; the other half is us, struggling to survive, rootless and homeless in the hot sun, begging the world to see our wounds and to hear our shrieks" (Gigoo, 190).

For centuries, Kashmir has witnessed an influx of varied cultures, ideas and faiths, all of which blended into its plural fabric. G.M.D. Sufi pertinently observes that "the cult of Buddha, the teachings of Vedanta, the mysticism of Islam have one after another found a congenial home in Kashmir" (Sufi, 19). Kashmir's milieu embraced new creeds without discarding earlier ones. There thus evolved a unique socio-cultural fabric which gave primacy to shared values and tradition that comprised *Kashmiriyat*. Riyaz Punjabi considers Hari Parbat hill, overlooking the city of Srinagar, as the metaphoric "epicentre of Kashmir—geographically, mythologically and spiritually" (Punjabi, 101). On the north-eastern face of

this hill is the shrine of the great Kashmiri saint, Sheikh Hamzah Makhdoom; on the southwestern side is the abode of Chakreshwari Devi or Ma Sharada; in the foothills is the Gurudwara Chatti Padshahi. This hill epitomises the confluence of three important faiths—Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism—that epitomize the plural fabric of Kashmir in being a “a focal point where people of diverse faiths, coming from many directions, converge on one point—to provide a living instance of the adage that ways might be different, but they lead to one point” (ibid.). This confluence symbolises the Sufi mystic tradition that marks Kashmiriyat. Kashmiri poetry, in the words of K.N. Dhar, abounds in “exemplary tolerance between different sects professing various religions” (Dhar, 44). Lala Arifa, better known as Lal Ded, is regarded as Kashmir’s first mystic poet who is praised for giving essence to the idea of *Kashmiriyat* in her verses. Carried forward by Sufis through centuries, her tradition was revived and popularized in the 1930s and 1940s by the proponents of an emerging Kashmiri nationalism based on secular ideals that gained sway under Sheikh Abdullah (Zutshi, 22). The adulation of Lal Ded is manifested in Kashmiri Pandits’ claim she was a Shaivite and therefore a member of their community; Kashmiri Muslims argue that she was born a Kashmiri Pandit but professed Islam in later life. Her spiritual successor is Sheikh Nooruddin Noorani or Nund Reshi, another figure essential to the idea of Kashmiriyat as both Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims claim him as their spiritual guide. The former refer to him as *Shazanand* or “one who has attained ultimate truth” while the latter call his verses the *Kosbur Quran* or Kashmiri Koran. For centuries, Hindus and Muslims had lived in

peace and brotherhood even through the reigns of harsh, authoritarian and exploitative rulers who patronised the minority Hindus over majority Muslims.

Due to their high literacy, the Kashmiri Pandits continued to occupy the top and lower bureaucratic positions in J&K till the 1990s. This was vastly disproportionate to their population, and aroused the ire of the majority Muslims. These were called the *Karkun* Pandits, and they considered themselves socially superior. In the novel, Kashmiri Pandits are portrayed as a privileged class when contrasted with the Muslim characters. Sridar's great grandfather, Gulabju, is described as "an erudite man in his times," and an eminent Sanskrit scholar who was known in the valley as the first Kashmiri man to travel across Europe (Gigoo, 2). Mahanandju, Sridar's grandfather, is described as a well-known practitioner of traditional medicine and is held in high esteem by both the Hindus and Muslims. Lasa, Sridar's father, is a school teacher. Professor Wakhlu, who taught Mathematics, is described as the most popular teacher in Srinagar. Another Pandit, Nilkanth, is also described as an erudite scholar. In contrast, most of the Muslims who appear in the novel belong to the lower social classes. The sweeper in Sridar's household is a Muslim named Habib. Abdul Gani, Mahanandju's neighbour, is a gravedigger. Gulakhar, the ironsmith of the locality and the father of two girls—the beautiful Nusrat loved by Sridar loved, and the mad Tota—lives in a dilapidated house. Bilal Khor, the butcher, is a goon in the locality. The only Muslim of any social standing described in the novel is Ali, the bookseller, and a close friend of Lasa.

The militants' targeting of Indian government officials also finds its reflection in the novel. The Pandits see the first sign of militancy when Billa Puj, whose brother Majid was a JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front) militant, threatens Professor Wakhlu, a reputed teacher of Srinagar, and his family decides to leave the valley. Death threats and notices were common tools of the militants. Through the character of Justice Wangnoo the novel fictionalises the killing of Neel Kanth Ganjoo, the retired sessions judge who had sentenced the JKLF founder, Maqbool Bhatt, to death. Though JKLF militants claimed to target only those people whom they considered as "informers" or "intelligence agents," and not any particular religious minority, it is true that most of those killed were Hindus, and this increased Pandits' apprehensions. In the novel, in Sridar's locality, a Pandit named Hira Lal, who worked for BSF, was kidnapped by militants who suspected him to be an informer. There is also the story of a Pandit couple who are shot dead in Mattan as they refuse to follow militant diktats. Gigoo writes of the aftermath of this brutality when all Pandit families of Mattan escaped while the dead couple were cremated by their Muslim neighbours. In Sridar's locality, Amarnath, a retired Professor is also shot dead. All these killings are summed up in the novel as:

Stone pelting at the army bunkers became an obsession with the Muslim youths. The first expression of anger and hate against the domination of India was in terms of bricks, gravel and stones hurled at the convoys of the security forces. AK 47 guns became a common sight. The militants emerged from dark alleys and corners and fired at the soldiers keeping vigil behind the sandbag bunkers. The soldiers fired back

at the militants. Curfew was imposed during the night to contain violence. (Gigoo, 32)

The Pandits in the novel see themselves in such vulnerable conditions. The protagonist himself has a close escape when a funeral procession of a militant is fired upon and dozens of people are killed. The Pandits also witness the rape and murder of a girl, allegedly, by the security forces in his locality. In this state of chaos and confusion, they do not know how to cope; they feared for their lives; and the only alternative left is migration in the hope that things will improve in a new environment.

In these circumstances, Kashmir's age-old religious tolerance was plagued by religious hatred as Hindus and Muslims began to view each other as enemies. The bitterness of forced exile amongst Pandits made them view Kashmiri Muslims as the enemy. On the other hand, Pandit migration was perceived by many ordinary Kashmiris as a betrayal, in which they were left behind to face repression at the hands of the Indian state. In *The Garden of Solitude*, Gigoo depicts the departure of the Pandits through Manzoor, a Kashmiri Muslim, who tells Lasa, "Muslims are safe in Kashmir so long as the Pandits live here. Once the Pandits leave, the Indian forces will kill us" (Gigoo, 65). A weeping elderly Muslim pleads:

"Pandits, do not leave your motherland. It is a conspiracy by our enemy to separate brother from brother. We will all be slaughtered like sheep now. It will rain bullets on innocent Muslims. Jhelum will turn red with the blood of your brothers. Please,

listen to me. I speak from soul. Pandits, do not leave this place. Without you, how will we exist?” (Gigoo, 67)

Another instance of this sense of desolation can be seen in Ali’s letters to Lasa. Gigoo succinctly writes:

[We] are scared and have lost our freedom [...] We have been betrayed by the government, by the uniformed men, and by the agencies which claim to be our well-wishers. It is the land they want Lasa, not our hearts [...] My mother cannot sleep. The silence of the dark night terrorises her. She listens to the protestors raising slogans of freedom and asks me, ‘When will we be free?’[...] There is not a single Muslim family which has not lost a son. There are tales of loss in every house [...] Lasa, the Kashmir which belonged to us has changed. The Kashmir which once was ours is burning. Every day military crackdowns visit us. Mothers wake up to sudden disappearance of their sons. Those who took to violence, revolt and resistance die. Our Kashmir is no longer the paradise on earth. The smile on the face of a poor Kashmiri is false. (Gigoo, 175)

The physical distance between migrant Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims was compounded by the mental distance between them. Kashmiri Muslims were maligned by an extensive campaign of denigration against their whole community; they were branded as fundamentalists and denounced for their genocidal oppression against the Pandits. This is brought out in the novel by Qazi, the brother of Ali, who reveals the indignation of

Kashmiris about these allegations. Qazi negates the Pandits' feelings of betrayal and enforced migration by asserting, "We don't feel happy without Pandits at all" (Gigoo, 134).

Communal elements in both communities seized the opportunity by transforming the distance between the two communities into an unbridgeable gulf through propaganda and rumour-mongering. Some Hindu right-wing organisations wildly exaggerated figures of Pandits killed by militants. Many Pandits believed that Muslims could not be trusted; many Muslims opined that the Pandits were essentially disloyal and every Pandit was a *mukhbir*/informer, collaborating with the Indian military establishment. Many Pandits were killed by militants on this suspicion. Gigoo foregrounds this mistrust between the two communities in the novel:

Fear ruled the hearts of the Pandits, and they became suspicious of the Muslim neighbours and friends with whom they had shared close bonds for years. The same fear shattered the love Muslims had for the Pandits. The Pandits became suspects—informers and agents of India. (Gigoo, 32)

This fragmentation of society made Sanjay Kak, a writer, independent documentary filmmaker, and prominent Kashmiri Pandit, say that the imbroglio in Kashmir is not communal in the sense of "tension between Hindus and Muslims"; rather, it pushed these migrants "straight into the hands of the Hindutva right wing" (quoted in Barsamian 2014). This complicated matters further in the valley. The novel indirectly refers to the political machinations of a Governor, Jagmohan, to underline this and an old man shouts at the

fleeing Pandits, “The Hindu Governor has asked them to leave this place. He is the real villain. Islam does not teach violence. It is not right” (Gigoo, 68). Later, Ali writes to Lasa to say that this Hindu Governor betrayed them all by driving a wedge between Pandits and their Muslim brothers, but the Pandits’ homes and hearts were in Kashmir. They would surely return and live with their Muslim brothers and sisters someday as “Kashmir without the Pandits is no Kashmir. By losing you, Kashmir lost its soul” (Gigoo, 175).

Sridar’s friend, Shabeer, is depicted as seeing the whole issue of Pandit migration as “a conspiracy by the Government of India to get Pandits out of Kashmir, so that the army could fearlessly unleash terror, quell the freedom movement and kill those who stood for it” (Gigoo, 151). This, ironically, is in sharp contrast to another view held by most Pandits that they owed their lives to the Governor who assisted their migration, “Otherwise, we would all have perished in our homes” (Gigoo, 74). The contentious issue of Pandit migration gets stuck in these two sharply opposing versions which are indeed difficult to resolve. Gigoo’s response to these versions also finds its place in the novel: “[People] believed what their leaders wanted them to believe. The truth did not matter. The truth did not exist” (Gigoo, 105) [...] “Nobody knows the truth. Falsehood has become the truth and people like to listen to things which are not true” (Gigoo, 113). The politicisation of the dislocation of Pandits from the valley also finds its echoes in *The Garden of Solitude* when a conference is to be held in Delhi by Panun Kashmir, a Pandit organisation, to press their demands for a separate homeland within the geographical boundaries of the valley. Gigoo writes of an Indian politician who addressed the conference saying that Kashmiri Pandits would play an

important and decisive role in the future of Kashmir, that they had “to be patient and hold on to one another” as “Pandits were better outside Kashmir”, and that “the Government of India would use the Kashmiri Pandit card at the right time at the negotiation table to complicate the matters if it came to secession” (Gigoo, 127). This is a subtle pointer to the machinations of the Indian state and the apprehensions of Kashmiri Muslims.

There are also many occasions in the novel which reflect the tensions in the relationship between Muslims and Pandits. When a young man shouts at the Pandits: “Let the Pandit men leave Kashmir, but let them leave their women behind”, he is immediately rebuked by an elderly man: “Young man, I don’t want to argue with you. Some day you will realise your mistake” (Gigoo, 68). When the militancy begins to get a foothold, leading to the fears of persecution among the Pandits, Lasa tries to allay the fears of fellow Pandits by saying that nothing will happen to Pandits as they have co-existed with Muslims for hundreds of years. Tathia, his neighbour, counters him, saying that there was never any trust between Pandits and Muslims as the former were eyed with suspicion for being too loyal to India (Gigoo, 19). Muslims give assurances to Pandit neighbours in unanimous terms: “Do not worry. No one will touch you and your family. This is your home. This land is yours too. You are safe” (Gigoo, 54). Manzoor, a former student of Lasa, goes to the extent of saying that “Don’t leave your home. I will die to protect your family. You are my teacher” (Gigoo, 56). Another neighbour says: “Don’t leave your house. You will live with us in Independent Kashmir” (Gigoo, 57). None of these assurances from Muslim neighbours and friends, however, has any impact as their worst fears are echoed through Nilkanth, an elderly Pandit,

“We will be butchered and thrown into the Vitasta”, the Sanskrit name for river Jhelum (Gigoo, 54). The Pandits are alarmed with the Muslims’ welcome for gun-toting youth, hailing them as heroes. For majority of the Muslims in Kashmir, Gigoo states, India stood for “oppression and imperialism” (Gigoo, 64) and lends credence to Chitrlekha Zutshi’s argument that “the movements that have arisen in Kashmir in the postcolonial period seek to address Kashmiri regional, political, and economic aspirations through an appeal to people’s religious identities” (Zutshi, 329).

In his essay, “Midnight's Children: Kashmir and the Politics of Identity,” Patrick Hogan distinguishes between two kinds of identity. “Categorical identity”, he says is “one's self-concept which in turn, comprises of the hierarchized series of categories like sex, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality and many others (Hogan, 517), while “practical identity” perceives Kashmiri tradition as “the complex of habits, beliefs, and attitudes [...] shared by all the inhabitants of Kashmir regardless of their religious affiliations” (Hogan, 528). In the 1990s in Kashmir, categorical identity was manifested in the beginnings of the movement for independent nationhood and had religion as its motivating force. The categorical identity of Kashmiris thereby confronted their practical identity. Kashmiri Pandits, bound to Muslims through practical identity, suddenly found themselves in a precarious position as they “didn’t know what to do [and] waited helplessly for things to unfold and confined themselves to their houses” while slogans like “Freedom from India” and “We want Free Kashmir” reverberated across the valley (Gigoo, 34). This complicates the conception of Kashmiriyat as a standard analytical tool in studying the culture and politics of Kashmir. Chitrlekha

Zutshi locates and interrogates Kashmiriyat as a historical entity, asserting that Kashmiri regional identities have been far more ambiguous, and certainly more complex than the term Kashmiriyat would lead one to assume. Zutshi argues:

To suggest that a Kashmiri identity, Kashmiriyat, defined as a harmonious blending of religious cultures, has somehow remained unchanged and an integral part of Kashmiri history over the centuries is a historical fallacy. Certainly, Kashmiri identities have followed a distinct trajectory depending on a host of factors, including state and economic structures, political culture, and the religious milieu at particular historical moments. (Zutshi, 55)

In the early years of the armed conflict, Kashmiriyat was rapidly being replaced by a new kind of religious oriented nationalism. Gigoo points to a new kind of identity being articulated by the proponents of militant nationalism:

The names of towns and streets were changed to reinforce a new cultural identity. Green was decreed to be the colour for all signboards of the shops and commercial establishments. The time in all the watches and clocks was turned backwards by half an hour. Pamphleteering became an obsession. New militant organisations put posters all over the city announcing their mission. The posters carried warnings against those suspected to be harmful to their cause and the movement. (Gigoo, 36)

In this vitiated atmosphere, drastic changes had shattered the socially vibrant Kashmiri Pandits into fear, atrophy and dementia. The novel dwells upon this:

The Pandits kept the windows of their houses permanently shut. They were scared to venture out on the roads. The Pandit women stopped putting tilaks on their foreheads to mask their identity. The men grew beards. They did not speak to one another on the streets. They abandoned their traditional greeting 'Namaskar'. (Gigoo, 39)

Kashmiri Pandits, thus, became cultural as well as spatial migrants in their own land by having to give up the markers of their cultural and geographical identity when moving out of the valley into Jammu. Once they had been a community with power and prestige; for long, they had been a politically, socially and economically vibrant force. A Dogra lady conveys to Lasa when he is in Jammu: "We have so much respect for the Pandits. You are such a learned community. It is so sad that you had to leave your home behind" (Gigoo, 81). The community, which once took pride in its "*sanskars*", or values, had to "sweat blood and tears" (Gigoo, 84). In their own country, the Pandits were forced to live the life of 'exile', 'exodus', 'migrants' or 'refugees', the various descriptions that the Pandits use for themselves. In an interview, Mridu Rai conveys the significance of these descriptions that the Pandits use for themselves. She argues, "The indictment of the Indian state is forcefully expressed in these descriptions and their decrying of both the Indian state's inability to protect them when in Kashmir and then its failure to rehabilitate them after their forced

departure” (quoted in *Al Jazeera* 2011). The Pandits felt betrayed both by militants and the Indian government, as is summed up by a young Pandit’s lamentation: “We were slain there. And now we will be slain here” (Gigoo, 84).

Gigoo describes the hapless condition of the migrants living in camps:

Days were spent sitting and talking about whatever came to their minds; their plight and their sordid condition [...] This waiting was [...] for a new day to dawn and the new evening to descend [...] For months together marriages in the Pandit migrant community did not happen at all. No birth took place in any of the families living in the camps. There were only deaths. (Gigoo, 45)

These pathetic living conditions in migrant camps, coupled with the loss of home resulted in the Pandits, especially their elders being overcome by trauma, depression and dementia. Narrating the trauma of his elderly grandfather, Pamposh tells Sridar:

My grandfather barely speaks. He lost his voice while leaving the village [...] he stopped talking after we crossed the Banihal tunnel. I saw him look sadly at the fading mountains for long, till they disappeared completely, one by one, into his frozen dreams. And he swallowed his fright. Today I cannot hear what he says. His words do not come out of his mouth. (Gigoo, 97)

It is a loss bemoaned by Amitav Ghosh, who sees “the twin terrors of insurgency and repression” producing a “single literary leitmotif” of “the loss of Paradise” that induces “no

greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy [...] a grief beyond consolation” (Ghosh, 308 – 313). “I am a man without a reflection” is how Sridar’s grandfather, Mahanandju, underlines the loss of home and memories of past life in Kashmir (Gigoo, 85). Lasa’s advice in these circumstances is to “stave away decaying thoughts” of migration and home, but with time, Mahanandju’s memory, symbolic of his community, becomes more and more fragmented as “Darkness invaded his days. Darkness descended like a plague and tore every ray of light that shone in his heart and soul. Nothing was [going] to change this state [...] this was irreversible” (Gigoo, 114 – 115). The trauma of migration pushes Mahanandju into depression and lunacy. The loss of home and exodus from his roots are emblematic of his community.

In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said posits that “Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present” (Said, 1). In the novel, this is manifested in the words of Rupesh Zadoo, a Kashmiri Pandit in the US, who tells Sridar that their children need to “know” and “preserve” their past, their “age-old culture” in order to “remember that we were uprooted from our homes and made to wilt in an unfamiliar land in our own country” so as to “rediscover and regain” what was lost (Gigoo, 189). Carlos Fuentes’ words—“We must go forward, because the present is unjust and insufferable, but we cannot kill the past in doing so, for the past is our identity, and without our identity we are nothing” (quoted in Harlow, 82)—echo Lasa’s lamentation that “the present is our end. We have only the past to seek refuge in” (Gigoo, 76). It is a past that Gigoo says is “too beautiful to be left behind”, a past that displays “a longing to be re-lived”,

a past that “aspired to race past the present and future” since the present was “just a crippled memory, a child’s play, a bubble” (Gigoo, 70). It is very poignantly summed up in a migrant’s retort “My address is – Yesterday” (Gigoo, 83). It was difficult for the Pandits to delineate their past from their present. They longed to live life backwards. For the Kashmiri Pandits, their past is the continuity with their present and the definition of their future: “[...] we must remember our ancestors; remind ourselves who we are and where we came from. We must pass on the stories of our ancestors [...]” (Gigoo, 158) as “Longing and nostalgia will keep us [them] sane and rooted” (Gigoo, 179). The Pandits in the novel symbolise a civilisational continuity, but it seemed that this “civilisation ceased to exist” and “dangled between nothingness and forgetfulness” (Gigoo, 208). The words of Sridar’s friend, Pamposh, reiterate the sense of loss: “We have no portraits of our gods and goddesses. No pictures of our ancestors [...] Never before have I felt the desire to unknow myself and others” (Gigoo, 97).

The exodus from the valley severely impacted the collective consciousness of Kashmiri Pandits. However, their traditions and shared values served to sustain a vital sense of community amongst them. In official documents and records, they were called “Internally Displaced Migrants” and their migration had the potential of obliterating their identity as “the memory was hazy, the reflections blurred, the images distorted”; they were “apprehensive of their identity getting assimilated in a larger Hindu identity” (Gigoo, 81). There was distinctiveness about Kashmiri Pandits and identity which set them apart from their co-religionists in other parts of India. In Jammu, the Pandits found it hard to be part

of a milieu which contrasted with their own ways of living and underlined the cultural and geographical incongruity between the valley and Jammu. The community feared the extinction of their unique identity, which is reflected in the novel in the pained words of a Pandit in a migrant camp in Jammu:

All of us sold our properties in Kashmir and severed our last ties with our own homeland. Our children do not speak in Kashmiri now. The government does not care for us any longer. We are voiceless! We gave up the hope for the homeland. Our leaders chased elusive dreams. Ours was a short-lived cause. Now, we have no cause, no longing and no hope. We are free finally. A homeless lunatic at the shrine of Goddess Zala in Kashmir had predicted that we would betray ourselves, our children, our ancestors. Our dreams are now in shreds, behind a fading recollection of our forgotten past. (Gigoo, 241)

Many Pandits claim persecution by citing the era of Sultan Sikander, who they call *but shikan* or idol breaker. His reign was, what many Pandits allege, marked by forced conversions and destruction of temples which forced all but eleven Kashmiri Pandit to flee from the valley (Dewan, 365). The sense of victimhood marks the telling of this tale down generations. This stands in contrast to the known fact of their status as a privileged class during the larger part of their history. This inherent contradiction lies at the core of divergent views. On one hand, a Pandit settled in Delhi, tells the protagonist:

Good that we left Kashmir long back. What did we have there that belonged to us anyway? There was no beauty at all. It was a wretched darkness. Pandits were living on borrowed time. This had to happen one day. There was no trust between the Pandits and Muslims; only pretence. Exile has always been our destiny. I lost my old house ages ago, but I gained my freedom outside Kashmir. (Gigoo, 89)

On the other hand, an old Pandit couple, despite the ordeal of migration, also recount the love and compassion of their Muslim neighbours to the protagonist:

All of our Muslim neighbours and friends were dear to us. We were all together most of the time [...] Their children played in our courtyard every day. They were like our family. Women cried bitterly and beat their chests when they heard we were leaving our homes. [Our neighbour's] wife stood on the street and pleaded to God to stop the Pandit families from migrating from the village. She even thrashed her son with wild nettles for keeping silent and bringing a gun home. (Gigoo, 200)

Despite the years of pain, suffering, homelessness, and the distancing from Muslims, many Pandits nurture hopes of returning back to their homes in the valley. This angst and its reparation is represented in the novel in the words of a Pandit who Sridar meets in the course of collecting individual stories and testimonies for his book: "We will find all our ancestral possessions when we return to our homes. Don't worry. After all, we have to be cremated in the land of our ancestors. Where else do we go from here" (Gigoo, 201) Sridar's father, Lasa, also nurses this hope when he writes to his old friend, Ali: "This parting is not

forever. We will meet. We will re-live the lost time” (Gigoo, 179). In this respect, the novel is strangely reminiscent of the line in Agha Shahid Ali’s poem, “Pastoral” dedicated to his Kashmiri Hindu friend, Suvir Kaul, “We shall meet again, in Srinagar”, writes Ali, “Till the soldiers return the keys / And disappear” (quoted in Jaleel, 2002).

As the conflict in Kashmir lingers on, there is a growing realisation that the Kashmiri identity and its struggle is incomplete without Kashmiri Pandits and repeated calls have been given for the Pandits’ return to the valley. Prominent Kashmiri separatist leader, Syed Ali Geelani, assured Pandits that “Muslims will provide every possible help to safeguard the Pandits and their property as their fight was not against them [but against the Indian government]. You are our brothers, you are a part of this society, you are a part of our body” (quoted in *The Hindu*, 2011). The story of Muslims and Pandits vis-a-vis the conflict, especially social relationships, may possibly appear to breed irreconcilable perspectives, but there can be no two opinions about the suffering and the pain that the armed conflict has engendered for the people of both communities. It is also noteworthy that Pandits were not the only migrants. In the novel, Gigoo underlines this when he writes: “both communities lost a generation; Muslims lost many children and Pandits lost their elders” (Gigoo, 79).

After a gap of 25 long years, when Sridar returns to the valley and sees his deserted home and neighbourhood, he reflects on the devastation: “After all these years nothing seems to have changed here in our locality, yet, much is lost!” (Gigoo, 225). The other side of this is conveyed through Sridar’s childhood friend, Gowhar, who says:

I dream freedom. I am the persecuted and the betrayed [...]’ ‘This is the voice of the Kashmiri Muslim now. “You Pandits did a wise thing by leaving Kashmir. At least, you saved yourself from dying many deaths every day. Kashmir is a place where human values never mean anything. (Gigoo, 229)

The Garden of Solitude brings to the fore many perspectives that represent the Kashmiri Pandits’ realities and thinking consequent to the rise of militancy in the valley. The novel delicately underlines a long-neglected human story which comprises of myriad tales of betrayal, displacement and suffering. It appropriates Olive Senior’s view that the function of literature “is not to present the world as it is, but to present it in a new light through the narrative power of art” (Senior quoted in *The Guardian*, 2013). The novel’s significance is centred around an integral, but often neglected, aspect of the conflict in Kashmir. By drawing upon critical points of view in Kashmir’s history, the novel brings into focus the intricate and paradoxical nature of the valley’s socio-political life which defies simple prescriptive paradigms. The complex saga of the conflict in Kashmir is sensitively brought out by Gigoo. Nowhere does the narrative lay claim to depicting reality in its entirety; rather, its strength lies in giving voice to multiple dimensions of the conflict. In a major way, this novel offers a deflected narrative trajectory that veers away from the official dominant narratives, giving voice to common Kashmiris who have lived through enormous suffering, who have been denied their due place by history, and whose very identity is in danger of extinction.

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