

COSTS OF KASHMIR CONFLICT ON PANDITS AS DEPICTED IN SIDDHARTHA GIGOO'S THE GARDEN OF SOLITUDE: AN APPRAISAL

Article Particulars

Received: 24.10.2017

Accepted: 28.10.2017

Published: 30.10.2017

MOHD LATIF RATHER

Lecturer 10+2 Political Science, School Education (J&K), India

MOHD NAGEEN RATHER

Assistant Professor English (Contract)

Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST) Awantipora,
Pulwama, Kashmir, India

Abstract

Jammu and Kashmir, the state known for breeding brotherhood, cooperation and communal harmony has been torn by the conflict which became one of the major reasons for division of people on the basis of religion. Kashmir valley was a place where Pandits and Muslims lived like brethren but unfortunately the dangerous political conditions forced the Pandits to leave the valley- their own land in late 1980's and early 1990's and live a miserable life elsewhere. Many writers recorded the wounds the conflict gave to people in general but the sufferings of Pandit community were either contracted to a single page or left unmentioned. However Pandit Siddhartha Gigoohas painted in his novel Garden of Solitude recounts the beautiful times of peace in Kashmir, the onset of the armed insurgency, and specifically the forced exodus of Pandits and its aftermath.

The present paper attempts to bring out the predicament of the Pandits during and after the exodus and exile as shown in Gigoo's novel. The paper will also attempt to give textual evidences to show that the book is the faithful record of what happened to Kashmiri Pandits when they left their homeland in late 1980's and early 1990's.

Keywords: Conflict, Brotherhood, Harmony, Kashmiri Pandits, Muslims, Community, Exile and Exodus. Refugee camps, Predicament,

Introduction

The Garden of Solitude' (2011) is narrative of the bitterness of being in exile that makes it stand out in the swamp of present day modern English literature. Written by Delhi-based Kashmiri Pandit Siddhartha Gigoo and set against the backdrop of the exodus and exile of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland in 1990, it depicts the pain and agony of the Pandits, who had to face "difficult situations". A near about 2.5 to 3

lakh Kashmiris migrated from Valley(Mishra:1999) This is perhaps the first novel written about the migration of Pandits from the Valley by a Kashmiri Pandit. It is a poignant story about a boy named Sridar who belongs to a Hindu sect called Kashmiri Pandits and flees with his family from the divided, mainly Muslim Himalayan region. "It records and documents the exodus of a community from what had been its home ever since one knew of history" (R.Kher:2011) Gigoo's novel depicts the torment, the loss of heritage and their attempts to come to terms with the new life. Sridar, a young boy, watches the relationship of the Muslims and Pandits in Kashmir. He watches the rise of militancy, protests, killings and the euphoria for Aazadi. He is shocked at the suspicion, mistrust, betrayal and the divide between Pandits and Muslims. He longs to find his roots, his ancestry and his past. His desire to save the stories that are on the brink of extinction leads him from Jammu to Delhi, Varanasi, Allahabad, US and Ladakh. Weaving together dreams, memory and reality, the book follows Sridar through his search for identity until he eventually returns to his homeland to seek out stories about ancestry in danger of being lost forever. It is a tale describing the condition of the Pandits when rebellion broke out two decades ago, forcing many into exile from a beloved homeland Kashmir. He sees the torment that Pandits undergo in Jammu and Delhi in camps. He sees deaths, deprivation and diseases

Discussion

The Garden of Solitude is about Kashmiri Pandits driven away from the Valley in the wake of armed insurgency and political turmoil. The Pandits are uprooted and forced to live in Jammu, in the wake of loneliness, suffering alienation and no place to call home. Sridar – the son of the family is the protagonist and the story is seen through his point of view. Sridar is the metaphor of all the migrated Pandits. Gigoo's protagonist could be anyone of Pandits who was born in Kashmir during those times, through him Gigoo has depicted the pain of his community and his own. "Perhaps there are shades of me in the protagonist. But there could be shades of the protagonist in me too. Maybe I always wanted to be like the protagonist. (Gigoo). The novel is a narrative of a Kashmiri Pandit longing for his homeland.

Powerfully and emotionally, the novel narrates the pain of a young Kashmiri Pandit, his grandparents, parents, and the pitiful condition of his neighbours. It is the faithful record of what happened in Kashmir in late 1980's and early 1990's, which Gigoo himself admits that "What happened in Kashmir in the late eighties and the early nineties had a profound impact on me. Events such as militancy, the migration of Kashmiri Pandits and their plight in exile." (Gigoo:2011). In its description of the conditions that Kashmiri Pandits lived in camps, Gigoo shows how the older Pandits are dying every second and how it makes little difference if their neighbours are now Hindus (Dogras of Jammu), and how they still long for their Muslim neighbours. The author has succeeded in picturing how Pandits were the inseparable part of the Kashmiri community. He has visualized how they were the part and parcel of this

community, how they were contributing in the different fields of life here in Kashmir, especially in education. According to the author the Pandit families were always on the forefront to contribute their bit in education at a place where he narrates an incident where a Pandit who was running tuition classes for Pandits as well as for the Muslims. One day he left without informing anyone and the reason was unknown.

By mixing history, fiction, memoir, autobiography and much more and being conscious of his identity Gigoo describes painfully the Kashmir conflict which "none has dared to speak from a Kashmir Pandit point of view" (N. Lakshmi:2011). However he peeps into the homes and hearts of his Muslim brethren, visits Ladakh and gets into a discussion with a Panun Kashmir ideologue. And this is where Gigoo makes his way into what we call 'Kashmir problem' without possibly realizing it. He tries hard to do a balancing act, he narrates the agony of an old Kashmiri Pandits, and in the same vein he also tries to capture the fear of paramilitary forces under which a young Kashmiri Muslim spends his time. This is a balancing act. "Muslims lost many children and Pandits lost their elders" (pp-179).

The author has beautifully depicted how the elders from both the community who were living together from past many decades and whose ancestors had also lived there from hundreds of years, used to discuss religion, politics, philosophy, Rumi's poetry and many other things on a short get together. Discussing and smoking from 'Jajeer'.

Adding to this communal harmony the author keeps on narrating how the daily interactions of ladies from both the communities used to be full of love and care. Another important thing was the relation of young boys from both the communities with each other. They used to study and play together, tasting the life together and who were unaware of all the things which happened lately, but due to the turmoil which erupted compelled them to migrate (Gk:2017).

Gigoo visualizes the horrific situation when all these interactions, relations and the bondages broke apart. When they felt that their past was a dream and that was the reality which they would have to face, the brute reality that compelled them to break all the emotional and the spiritual relations forever. The reality when Pandits found themselves stuck in the situation where they were unable to judge anything. However they were not ready to do so but the conditions were totally different and totally against.

At some length, the author delves upon the complex relationships between Pandits and Muslims and how suspicion creeps into the fragile peace of these relationships once the call of Azaadi reverberates across the valley much to the chagrin of the Pandits.

The author describes the heartfelt feeling when the Muslim neighbours who used to share their pain and agony changed their behaviour towards their Pandit neighbours. He narrates when he heard of a neighbouring lady cursing them. He quotes her, "May God destroy the seed of Pandits". This sudden change in the behaviour especially from those who were very close to Pandits was having a strong emotional bondage with

them is really painful. His narrative gives the real mixed feeling and response of Muslims regarding the painful departure of Pandits who insist then not to leave by saying, "Pandits, do not leave your motherland. It's a conspiracy by our enemy to separate brother from brother". (pp-67) but Gigoo shows that there were some who were happy to say, 'Let the Pandit men leave Kashmir, but let them leave their women behind' (pp-68) By his deepest emotions and due to the fact that he belongs to the same Pandit community who migrated during 1990 from Kashmir Gigoo has succeeded in presenting the real image (taking about the emotions and sufferings which a common man had to undergo) of that situation which resulted in the mass migration of Pandits "Every truck carried a home and helplessness" (pp-66). The heartrending moment of reconciliation, mutual fear and collective grief at the Qazigund stop while fleeing to Jammu is presented as this that "There were some who had left without informing their brothers. Qazigund was a place which united brothers and cousins, who had spent years living separately due to family feuds."

Gigoo records and documents the exodus of a community from what had been his home ever since one knew of history. When the novel takes us to the chaos of refugee camps & schools it speaks of the sordid condition and the inhuman existence in which the Pandits are forced to live. It talks of despondency, stink and hopelessness, of rot and dirt, of despair and existential and identity crisis.

Although Sridar is fortunate not to have lived in refugee camp for long but for all those who suffer them without a hope of freedom from them find voice in the extremely well sketched character of Pamposh, a reticent boy living in one of the many refugee camps in Jammu, the problems and agony is told by Pamposh to Sridar:

Every day I lead the life of a centipede. I crawl. I lick. I hide. I sting. I wake up to the fumes of kerosene in the morning and the sting of speeding ants, feeding ravenously on the sugar spilled on the floor of the tent. It feels as if I have never had a morsel of rice for ages. I wake up hungry and go to bed hungry. I lead the life of a centipede, I crawl. All around the camp, there is the stench of human excrement and waste. People wake up in the morning, hungry and muddled. The awakenings are pallid. The water in the water tanker smells foul, and the children lie whole day in their own vomit. The quivering smile on my mother's face is false. I want to peel off that false smile from her face, so that she is beautiful once again. Father spends most of the time playing cards with other migrants near the highway tea shop. I am a mute spectator to the horrors of the life inside my tent. The air inside is squalid..." (The Garden of Solitude: p -97)

Pamposh painfully describes the agony and the heart rending sentiments of his grandfather which makes the reader realise what is it to leave one's home for ever that too without any fault of the person affected. The trauma left many Pandits mentally ill and some died only because of this trauma of loss of their roots, identity and home:

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 my mouth.(The Garden of Solitude:p -97)

The process of migration generally puts mental stresses which generally precipitate mental disorders. This novel too describes beautifully that a numberless persons developed psychiatric disorders like anxiety, neurosis, depression, nightmares, insomnia, delusions and phobias. The migrant existence debilitated the mental health of many Pandits. The Psychiatric morbidity of Pandits is almost incurable. Lasa describes the condition of Mahanandju as:

He has lost his memory partially. He takes dreams and illusions for real and he confuses reality with dreams .He is beyond any treatment now and his mental condition will deteriorate rapidly. This is what the doctor said. Alzheimer's! (The Garden of Solitude: p.171)

All along in the plot Gigoo depicts the stoic pride of a community more than this that, "Every evening the daughter-in-law of the house washed the utensils noisily in the basin, so that their neighbours believed that they had eaten". The novel is full of emotions and heart rendering incidents which one has to face especially when one has to live the life of a migrant.

As it has been said that the conflicts, miseries and hard times do give birth to some new things, that very thing can be seen in this novel .The growing hopelessness in the migrant camp is summarized by the aging and haunted Lasa in his letter to his son. Sridar says, "I met husbands who had lost the love for their wives, and wives who no longer felt the need to hold their husbands' hands. Some couples have not shared an intimate moment ever since they left their homes. Living in tents has turned them into cold humans." because they are faced with meaninglessness of life.

Arshia Malik says that "the resilience of children which keeps getting reiterated from the annals of history in the stories of the forced abduction of Native American children and Aborigines by white racist colonials of Canada and Australia or survivors of the Holocaust concentration camps is brought forth in this line. "In the new city the children found themselves despicably enticed to the new surroundings."(Arshia: 2015) as they "... face difficulties in these unfamiliar surroundings" (p-72)A little girl in the migrant camp whose mother assures her every day that tomorrow they were going to her grandparents' house is evidence of confusion and scepticism . "In the days to come, Sridar always remembered her as the little girl who waited for a 'tomorrow which never came.'"Gigoo dextrously describes the migration and mental trauma associated with it which had deep impact on people. The hard times during the migration from their own land then the miseries while living as migrants in the land which was alien to him, the land where people (migrants) were seen dying of alien sunstrokes and bites:

There was only one question to be asked during the funeral processions that left the camp every day. 'Snakebite or sunstroke?'(The Garden of Solitude :p101)

The migrants lived a life almost of animals without any secrecy, dignity and they even seem to have lost their religious roots. They found no respite from the tortures of migration for a longtime. The physical and psychological trauma they faced is really painful to hear. The novel is exclusively devastating in its description of migrant life in the camps:

When we are asleep, we cannot even stretch our arms and legs. There are no hangers to hang our clothes on. No cupboards to keep our personal belongings in. We have no portraits of our gods and goddesses. No pictures of our ancestors. During the day, we hide from the blazing sun. At night we live from one insect bite to another. Centipedes, millipedes, and spiders are our companions. We must learn how to live with them.' 'Never before have had I felt the desire to unknown myself and others. The smell ... the touch ... the breath ... the sigh!' (The Garden of Solitude : p 97-99)

Waiting is a sweet experience as it fills the one with hope and joy that something better is going to happen but when one is waiting for waiting's sake is a darkest part of his life. Such waiting questions the existence of the one who is waiting and raises doubts regarding the meaning of life, its purpose. The following scene from the novel reminds us of Samuel Becket's tramps:

The migrants sat all day long on a rocky mound and discussed the affairs of their community. Days were spent sitting and talking about whatever came to their minds; their plight and their sordid condition. Waiting kept them busy. For many it was a lacerating wait. They had not yet realised that this waiting was not to end. They did not know what they were waiting for. This waiting was not for returning to their homes, not for peace in the Valley, but for a new day to dawn and the new evening to descend. (The Garden of Solitude : p-100-101)

The novel comes back to Kashmir. Sridar comes home but the occupants aren't the same. The of the new owners asks her mother who could this man be who speaks Kashmiri like them but isn't one. The unusual homecoming smells of hope and underlines somehow the layers of complexity that's inherent in relations between the two Kashmiri communities. He is welcome everywhere and people are cordial but that doesn't take away the fact that he is seen as someone who has come from Delhi, a guest. A musing by Sridar's father Lasa, whose genial courage all along the trauma of migration and rootlessness is remarkable and noteworthy:

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. Even years later, he would be not be able to fathom the depth of the wounds the migration inflicted on a generation. (The Garden of Solitude : p72)

This is the situation faced by every Pandit as the novelist himself says "but now that many people have read my novel, they all tell me that this is their story. There weren't any migrants whose share of misfortunes was less than the others. The same conditions, life in camps, the torment, the struggle, the shattering of dreams, the torment of the

aged, and then the dementia...Many perished, longing to return to their homeland, Kashmir. The young generation still suffers from an erosion of identity and a sense of rootlessness." (Gigoo: 2011) Arshia says that nothing sums up the situation and unanswered questions about the future of a beautiful valley than in Nagraj' line as he says to Sridar, "This is not peace Sridar. This is only a semblance of normalcy and peace ... common people feel betrayed. They are tired of the violence, the bloodshed and the deaths of their children. Their voices stand suppressed." (Quoted by M.Arshia:2015) At the end 'The Book of Ancestors' is released on a hot day in Jammu where the exiles live. It begins to rain as soon the book launch finishes. The author, like everyone else too, isn't sure if the Pandits will ever return to their homeland. This uncertainty and is present in the novel from the first page to the end.

Conclusion

The Garden of Solitude is a politically and historically relevant and valuable document which follows the travails of Kashmiri Pandits who find themselves in the middle of the chaos and turmoil that erupted in the Valley of Kashmir in 1990. The novel gives a multi-dimensional view of the fate of the targeted Kashmiri Pandits (a minority in the state) and the opinions and sentiments of a major Muslim population that equally gets sucked into the vortex of death, mayhem and gore. Gigoo depicted the pain and unvoiced trauma faced by the Pandits during migration dextrously yet painfully. Undoubtedly the exile, dragged Pandits in the gorge of trauma, hopelessness and homelessness. The novel is an original and realistic commentary of political turmoil of 1990's.

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