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# PARADISE LOST: STORIES OF LOSS OF HOME AND IDENTITY IN SELECT EXILE NARRATIVES OF KASHMIRI PANDIT AUTHORS

**[1]Ms. C.G. Akhila, [2]Dr. Ranjana Das Sarkhel**

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**Abstract**

The Kashmiri Pandit community has been living in exile for more than 30 years now since their genocide in 1989. Their religious persecution has led to the loss of their homeland and identity. Unfortunately, the land known as the paradise of India has become a distant dream for its very own Kashmiri Pandit community, which has a chronicled history of over 5,000 years. It seems like *Paradise Lost* for the community – permanently exiled from paradise like Adam and Eve. While the entire country and the world can visit Kashmir as tourists to admire its beauty, it is ironic that the Kashmiri Pandit community is still forced to live in exile. Though the pain of losing their homes is the most excruciating for the community, they have lost so much more. Their genocide has also led to the loss of their identity, as with the loss of Kashmir, an integral part of their identity has been lost forever. Then there is the loss of loved ones, culture and language, which has been happening over time. As for the subsequent generation of Kashmiri Pandits, Kashmir is a dream that they live through the eyes of their parents and grandparents. They have never visited it but have kept it alive in their family stories. And this denial of their right to return and reclaim their homeland and heritage is not only their biggest loss but also the gravest of injustices for them. There are many emerging authors from the community who have written extensively about their multi-faceted loss while living in exile, and this paper attempts to examine the same.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri Pandit writings, exile writings, exile and loss, loss of identity, exile literature

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, MATS University, Raipur, CG

[2]Professor, Department of English, MATS University, CG

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## Introduction

Kashmir is a land of paradoxes. The land is a striking contrast between a beautiful scenic milieu and one engulfed with bloodshed and communal tension. On one hand, it is known as Paradise on Earth and the mini-Switzerland of India, but on the other, it is also one of the most conflicted zones in the world. It is the epitome of rich culture, heritage and brotherhood. And Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus were an integral part of its culture and history for more than 5,000 years until 1989 when their genocide pushed them into permanent exile. Their forced exodus denied them the paradise called Kashmir – once their homeland. And it is ironic that while the whole country and the world can visit this paradise as tourists, their own natives are still denied entry due to their religious identity.

It is not wrong to compare the plight of Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus with that of Adam and Eve who also lost their paradise, and since then, generation after generation, their progenies, men, and women, are living in exile. Their departure from their homeland is repetitive and not all that different from the stories of all the communities and people who were exiled from their country and homes – as John Milton explains the departure scene of Adam and Eve from paradise, the garden of Eden, upon being expelled by God, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*:

"They looking back, all the eastern side beheld

Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,

Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate

With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;

The world was all before them, where to choose

Their place of rest, and providence their guide:

They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way."

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book VII, 1667)

The exile of Adam and Eve, as explained in the poem, is brought upon by Satan. It is agonising for them, but it is also he, Satan, who is a sufferer before anybody else. He is among the fallen angels of God. His transformation from Book I to Book XII of the poem is drastic. In the beginning, he appears as a heroic figure who is protesting and rebelling against an unjust God. But by the end of the poem, he is reduced to nothing but a burnt shell, a snake devoid of limbs and unable to talk. During his end, he is surrounded by fallen angels who become snakes like him. Despite being the ruler of Pandemonium (the capital city of hell in the poem), he is banished to hell on a lake of fire. Like Adam and Eve, it is the Kashmiri Pandits and the Hindus who are expelled from paradise, but the sufferers are also the perpetrators responsible for their exile and the mute spectators, as Kashmir was never the same since their genocide. The militancy only increased day by day, year after year in the valley since the insurgency of 1989, taking the lives of people from all communities. Narrating one conversation in his memoir, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir*, with a man who had visited them at their refugee tent from Kashmir asking to sell their house to him, Pandita writes:

> "'You live in such poor conditions, but at least you can breathe freely. We have been destroyed by this Azadi brigade, by these imbeciles who Pakistan—may it burn in the worst fires of hell! —gave guns to. We cannot even say anything

> against them there, because if we do, we will be shot outside our homes. Or somebody will throw a hand grenade at us.' He would then sigh and a silence would descend upon the room, broken only by his slurps." (Pandita, 140)

This is proof that while Kashmiri Pandits lived in exile in estranged lands in loss and alienation after their exodus, those who remained in Kashmir became alienated from the peace and brotherhood that the valley was once known for.

In a literal sense, we are all exiled in one way or the other. We constantly keep changing our home, whether it is leaving our first home at birth – our mother's womb – or leaving our home on this earth upon death. As John Simpson writes in the introduction of the *Oxford Book of Exile*, edited by him:

> "Each of us is an exile; the thought is hackneyed one, but it still retains a little force. We are exiles from our mother's womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace, even if we are not exiles in the more conventional sense of the world." (Simpson, VII)

John Simpson, in his edited compilation of essays, gives a unique and broader perspective of exile. He doesn't restrict exiles to merely political and religious ones but includes even those who left their homes and went out into the world, exploring uncharted waters, to seek or in search of higher meanings. From adventurers who threw away everything and headed out into the unknown, misfits who were too intelligent or restless to stay at home, and people who tuned into themselves to block out the real world to the writers who needed a quieter or a more stimulating atmosphere to carry out their literary pursuits, Simpson categorises everyone, all those who left their homes, be these physical or psychological, as exiles. He even writes that "[e]xile can after all be a relief as well as a sadness" (Simpson, VII). This is true of the Kashmiri Pandits' exile, the Jews who lived in exile, and all those communities who were forcefully expelled from their countries or homelands due to their religious identity or beliefs. Going into exile saved their lives, but in exile, they lost their sole reason and purpose for life.

In exile, they got lost in anonymity, from where they could never return. As Said rightly says, "Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider" (Said, 181). The Kashmiri Pandits have been living in exile for more than three decades, and their chances of return still look bleak. Exile pushed them into alienation. And in exile, they suffered not only the loss of their homes but also of their history, culture, identity and existence, of which Kashmir was an integral part. They are not just Pandits or Hindus; they are Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus. But the word "Kashmiri" is now just a namesake as is the other part of their identity: "Pandit" or "Hindu"; they cannot return to their homes.

Just a decade ago, few writers from the Kashmiri Pandit community made it a mission to save their community and the stories of their elders and ancestors from this oblivion. They made it their mission to tell their stories, which had been ignored by their own nation and the world for more than a decade. Edward Said says, "So many poets and writers lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity—to deny an identity to people" (Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 175). And the exile narratives by these authors give a deeper understanding of the pain of the Kashmiri Pandit community in the loss of their homes and identity, which they have been bearing for more than thirty years now, and without any promise of justice or rehabilitation.

## Loss of Home

French philosopher and social activist Simone Weil, in her essay "Uprootedness", published in her book *The Need for Roots*, writes:

> "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define." (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 40)

For the world, the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits was just an act of violence and injustice. But for the community, it was a complete uprootedness of their very existence. Some termed it "mass migration", while others called it "religious persecution". But the repercussions of the entire situation were far graver and more multi-faceted than what they seemed to be. It was a story of "loss" – loss of homes, roots, culture, language, scholarship and one's identity. The genocide of Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus completely uprooted them. To survive, they took refuge in adjacent areas of Jammu in refugee camps and in other parts of the country and the world. Those who could afford to do so, moved to one-room rented apartments from these refugee tents, the conditions of which were appalling.

Most of the people from the community had been living a dignified life back in their homes in Kashmir. The entire community was known for its scholarship and its loyalty and indulgence in education. Some of them had built huge homes with their savings of a lifetime. As Rahul Pandita writes in his memoir:

> "Living in hotel beyond a few days was not possible. There were hardly any savings to dip into. Father had put all his money into the house. When we had left, he had been extending our attic. He had ordered the choicest deodar wood, and weeks before crisis erupted the wood had arrived in planks and had been stored in attic." (Pandita, 100)

Like Pandita's family, other families had also built and preserved their homes and ancestral property with love, sweat, blood and their life savings. Some had exhausted their entire pension amount, only to leave it behind one day and live in abysmal conditions in government refugee camps. In the novel *The Garden of Solitude*, by Siddhartha Gigoo, Lasa, the son of Mahanandju and the father of Sridhar, too had nourished his home with great love and care. Gigoo writes:

> "Lasa had renovated the house and converted part of the courtyard into a kitchen garden. He had got the ceilings of all the rooms decorated with mats of har. Beautiful terracotta tiles adorned the floors of the corridor and the living room. A water heater was installed for heating the water during the winter." (Gigoo, 9)

For the people of the community, their homes were not just structures of brick and cement but a confluence of their tradition, memories, ancestors' blessings, roots to their beloved homeland and their generations-old culture, which was very indigenous to Kashmir. And with homelessness, they might have survived, but they lost the very purpose of their existence.

Post their exodus, their idea of home became transitory like their temporary stays, from refugee camps to rented rooms to small apartments in one of the many estranged corners of the country or the world. Wherever they went, they were outsiders. There was a sudden spike in room rents in Jammu once the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community transpired and

the demand for rented rooms arose. The people of this community who had once lived a dignified life were now at the mercy of house owners and the government to ensure a roof over their heads. Talking about one such incident in his memoir, Pandita writes how his house owners expected them to do little errands in exchange for a rented accomodation for which they were paying rent. Also, the owners would sometimes barge in on one pretext or another, leaving them with near-zero privacy. Due to this, many Pandit families had to keep hopping from one place, city and home to another. Narrating the episode of an ugly discord with his house owner, Pandita writes in his memoir:

> "A week after that ugly episode, we packed our bags again and shifted to yet another house. Seventeen years later, when we were shifting to a house of our own in a Delhi suburb, Father remembered that incident and how quickly we had gotten into the habit of packing our belongings and shifting. We counted the number of times we had shifted house since the day we left home. It roughly came to be around twenty. It may have been even twenty-two times, the same as the number of rooms in our house that Ma talked continually about." (Pandita, 139)

In fact, the translated edition of Pandita's memoir, released in December 2022, was titled *Meri Maa Ke Baees Kamre: Kashmiri Pandito Ke Palayan Ki Kaljayi Katha*, dedicated to the memory of his mother who during her ailing days would keep reiterating that they had twenty-two rooms in their home in Kashmir. The title says it all – how crucial their homes were to them.

What's most unfortunate about the homelessness of the Kashmiri Pandit community is the fact that they became homeless in their own country. After a period of contemplation, intellectuals came up with a term for them: "internally displaced people". Approximately 2,17,000 Kashmiri Pandits still live in Jammu, with around five to six people huddled in a refugee tent or a single-room apartment (Singh, 2016).

At the time of their genocide, when the Pandits had to board trucks to leave the valley, it seemed that the departure was only temporary and that once the situation normalised, they would eventually return to their homes. However, days, months, years and decades have passed. Many of them have died waiting for their return. But they continue to live in exile. As Gigoo, writes in the novel *The Garden of Solitude*, explaining the plight of Lasa and his family, who were among the other Pandit families from different towns and villages, all huddled up in the truck heading towards the refugee camps:

> "There were Pandit families from different towns and villages in Kashmir. Some people talked in hushed tones and some were speechless as though they had lost their voices. Others talked as though they were speaking for the first time after a long spell of silence. Lasa noticed that there was a sense of abandonment among the Pandits. Each truck carried a home, and hopelessness. Each truck trudged on inexorably, with terror-stricken faces looking pitifully all around." (Gigoo, 66)

For them, homelessness has now become permanent, after having lived in exile for more than three decades. Even though they found refuge in new cities and countries and built their homes elsewhere, their roots and heart still cling to Kashmir. As Pandita writes:

> "For me, though, exile is permanent. Homelessness is permanent. I am uprooted in my mind. There is nothing I can do about it. My idea of home istoo perfect." (Pandita, 224)

Even though this feeling of homelessness is permanent and the people of the community have somewhat resigned themselves to their fate, they still hope for a return and long for their homes.

**Loss of Identity**

When an entire community has to leave its homeland in the face of situations like war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing or religious persecution, they also leave behind their culture, rituals, distinctive practices and identity. Their homeland is like a terrarium that keeps together the distinct and diverse elements that make up the ecosystem of their community and existence. Their clothing, art, culture and literature, language, food and festivals are all interconnected with the land they are living in. For example, *pheran* is a clothing worn by Kashmiris to protect themselves from the cold; *kahwa*, a tea made of saffron, keeps their body warm in the extreme weather of the valley. All these elements though remain a part of their lives even after their migration but start to gradually lose relevance when living in a foreign land. This is what has transpired with the Kashmiri Pandits.

The Kashmiri Pandit writers have shared numerous stories of cultural extinction and identity loss in their exile narratives. Pandita writes in his memoir how, while living in exile, their culture and identity has been reduced only to a few special occasions and rituals:

> "We have been in exile for more than two decades. Kashmir is a memory, an overdose of nostalgia. But beyond this, there is nothing. Many among us have moved on. For most of us, Kashmir means a calendar hanging in our parents' bedroom, or a mutton dish cooked in the traditional way on Shivratri, or a cousin's marriage that the elders insist must be solemnized in Jammu." (Pandita, 210)

Expressing his fear of becoming extinct one day, Pandita establishes an intricate connection between one's traditions and the place one comes from. He further writes:

> "I began to worry that the story of our community would be lost in the next few decades. It was only because of the previous generation that our customs and traditions were being kept alive. . .. We are losing our tradition, our links to the place where we came from. This is evident during weddings, or when someone dies. Tradition is like an embarrassing grandparent who needs to be fed and put back to bed." (Pandita, 211)

Quite similar to Pandita's concern of existence is that of Agnishekhar, the Kashmiri Pandit poet and writer, who writes in his personal essay, published in an anthology edited by Siddhartha Gigoo, *Once We Had Everything: Literature in Exile*, "The Kashmiri Pandit is referred to as hangul—a stag on the brink of extinction" (Agnishekhar, Edited byGigoo & Gigoo & Ajit, 106).

A similar story is narrated by Siddhartha Gigoo in his personal narrative, *Once We Had Everything*, published in an anthology of the same name, edited by him, and having a compilation of similar narratives by different Kashmiri Pandit authors. It is 2016, and Gigoo's parents have come from Jammu to his home in

Delhi. They all have gathered to celebrate the festival *Pann* – an auspicious day celebrated to offer *roth*, a sweet bread, to the twin agricultural goddesses, Vibha and Garbha. The festival often falls on the auspicious day of the Hindu festival *Vinayak Chorum*, also known as *Vinayak Chaturthi*, to celebrate the birth anniversary of Lord Ganesha – the elephant-headed Hindu God of beginnings. Gigoo writes how his mother on this occasion assembles the family members in front of a vessel containing the *roth* and recounts a story that has been narrated for generations. It was the story of the origin of *Pann*. While Gigoo's mother was narrating this story, she paused halfway, as she was unsure what the rest of the story was like. Gigoo writes:

> "Mother pauses. 'What happens next?' I ask her. 'If Babi were alive, she would have told us what happens next,' Mother says. 'May we always be happy and flourish. May we always be together!'" (Gigoo, 20)

Like Gigoo's mother, there are others who look up to their elders and ancestors to carry forward their tradition. And with each passing generation, while their elders are dying, they have no one else to look up to, to carry forward such stories. With each passing generation, they are forgetting their customs and traditions.

Another writer Ramesh Hangloo, in his personal narrative "Why I Established Radio Sharda", published in the anthology, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus, and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits*, writes about how he started a radio channel named Radio Sharda on his own to preserve the culture, tradition and language of the community. He writes:

> "I was conscious that many aspects of our culture, especially the language, were on the brink of extinction. The youngsters were losing touch with our traditions and rituals. Slowly Radio Sharda evolved. This radio lays emphasis on the preservation of the Kashmiri language, identity of Pandits and the revival of age-old rituals, customs and traditions." (Hangloo, Edited byGigoo & Sharma, 259)

The Kashmiri Pandits are losing their culture and identity like sand slipping through one's fist. Though the community is trying hard to safeguard it, with each passing generation, their traditions and identity are withering away gradually and fading into nothingness. These stories by Kashmiri Pandit authors are proof of this. The loss of homes was not merely restricted to the loss of a roof over their heads. The loss of their home meant the loss of an entire part of their identity which was and still is rooted in Kashmir.

## Final Words

The only thing that can fix their loss is them returning to their lost homes. This is the only way to preserve their culture, identity and existence. But despite the interchanging governments' attempts to rehabilitate them back in their homeland, fresh cases of Kashmiri Pandits being killed lead to others refraining from returning. Former prime minister Manmohan Singh's 2008 relief package of Rs. 1,618 crore to facilitate their return did show some promise, but abysmal living conditions and a lack of basic amenities like drinking water and electricity made the stay of the returning Pandits in these government quarters difficult. The abrogation of Article 370 on 5 August 2019 paved the way for their return. According to a reply report presented to the Rajya Sabha by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in April 2021, terrorism incidents have reduced by 60 percent in Kashmir following the repealing of Article 370, and a total of 456

MOUs worth 23,152.17 crores have been signed with potential investors, fostering developmental projects and industrial enterprises in the valley.

Despite all these attempts of the government to bring them back to their native land, the possibility of their return remains questionable due to the continued insurgency and militancy in the valley. Another question is this: After so many years of living in exile, does their idea of the home remain the same? Is their longing for home, those apple orchards, the Jhelum River and the snow-clad valleys not smeared with the blood and fearful memories of violence and loss? Amidst these uncomfortable questions, their future seems lost in time; it is only time that will tell what the outcome of their pain and longing will be. Till then, all they can do is wait and write more stories of their loss and existence, with the hope that someday they will create ripples in the frozen lake of ignorance.

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