

READING SIDDHARTHA GIGOO: TRAUMA, MEMORY OF HOMELAND AND LONG WAIT FOR HOME

Dr. Mohammad Ameen Parray^{1*}, Iram Shafi Allaie², Ahsan Ul Haq Magray³

^{1*} Assistant Professor (English), Department of English, North Campus, University of Kashmir.

² Assistant Professor, Govt. Degree College for Women, Pulwama.

³ Assistant professor English, Deptt: of Higher Education J & K

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Mohammad Ameen Parray

*Assistant Professor (English), Department of English, North Campus, University of Kashmir.

Abstract:

Siddhartha Gigoo is one of the finest contemporary Kashmiri writers in English. He is a novelist, poet, filmmaker and trained musician. Most of his writings revolve around Kashmir, the homeland that he had to migrate from when turmoil struck Kashmir down in 1990s. This paper is an attempt to read and analyze select short stories of Siddhartha for understanding how he attempts a literary representation of the trauma that his displaced community faced as a result of political turbulence in Kashmir. Moreover, the article will focus on how Siddhartha attempts a literary representation of the memory of his homeland through his characters and their long wait for the return to their home (Kashmir). A select body of short stories from his work *A Fistful of Earth and other stories* would be analyzed for understanding the themes of trauma, memory and longing of homeland.

Key-words: Trauma, memory, turbulence, longing and *A Fistful of Earth and other stories*.

Introduction

Siddhartha Gigoo (b.1974) is a Kashmiri Pandit writer, novelist, poet and filmmaker who was born and brought up in the Khankah-e-Sokhta area of Down Town, Srinagar between Safakadal and Nawakadal in a highly educated and cultured Pandit family. His father, Arvind Gigoo, is also a known literary figure and academician. Since his early childhood, Siddhartha was inclined towards literature and to his luck the literary environment within the family enriched his literary sensibility.

Gigoo did his early schooling in Kashmir itself and when Kashmir was suddenly struck down by the political upheaval in 1990s he, as a teenager, had to migrate to Jammu along with his family. Gigoo resumed his studies at a refugee camp, where life in itself was hard and challenging. In his leisure time while bravely facing the heat of blazing Jammu sun, Gigoo continued to cultivate his literary sensibility by taking training in music.

Gigoo did his graduation in Humanities from University of Jammu and then moved to Delhi for doing Masters in English at the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Literary contributions of Sidhartha Gigoo

Sidhartha Gigoo is a prolific writer with numerous works to his credit. In 2011, he published his *The Garden of Solitude*, a work in which he depicts the trauma that Kashmiri Pandits suffered when they got uprooted in 1990s as a result of the political upheaval that abruptly struck down Kashmir. The novel documents the tragic story of Kashmiri Pandits, their sense of loss, hurried and painful departure from Kashmir and the sufferings that befell them in Jammu-based migrant camps. The novel was well-received by all classes of readers, especially by Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims, who actually could identify with the stories and their immediate background.

In 2015, Gigoo went on to publish a collection of short stories titled *A Fistful of Earth and other stories* in which he again engages to foreground the plight of Kashmiri Pandits in the post-migration phase and their deep psychological anguish something which is his personal set of experiences and that form his literary acumen as well. Select short stories from this collection will be analyzed in the later part of this paper.

Sidhartha published *Mehr: A Love Story* in 2018, *The Lion of Kashmir* in 2020 and *Love in the Time of Quarantine* in 2020.

He has co-edited non-fictional anthologies like *A Long Dream of Hope: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* (2015) and *Once We had Everything: Literature in Exile* (2018). He has two volumes of poetry titled *Fall and Other Poems* (1994) and *Reflections* (1995) to his credit also.

Gigoo scripted and directed two short films titled

The Last Day (2014) and *Goodbye, Mayfly* (2015). These short films of Gigoo were short listed for several awards at International Film Festivals.

Siddhartha Gigoo won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Asia) for his short story “The Umbrella Man”. He was also shortlisted for his stories for Lorian Hemingway Short Story Prize, Royal Society of Literature’s V.S Pritchett Short Story Prize, and Sean O’ Faolain Short Story Prize.

Trauma, memory, loss and longing

In 1989, Kashmir witnessed one of the most turbulent tides of its history. The mass uprising of people, on the one hand, and the enforced migration of Kashmiri Pandit community, on the other, led them to become the epitome of homelessness in Kashmiri traumatic fiction. Terrified by the anarchic situation in Kashmir, Kashmiri Pandits left their native valley for good, for the safety of their life leaving behind their hearths, homes, orchards, culture, identity and memories, something that would later haunt them in the plains outside the Valley. In conjunction with that, Victoria Schofield, prominent scholar on Kashmir, talks about the migration of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland:

In a mass exodus, at the beginning of march, about 1,40,000 Hindus left the valley for refugee camps outside Jammu. The more affluent took up residence in their second homes in Delhi, but the vast majority were housed in squalid tents in over fifty camps on the outskirts of both Jammu and Delhi. Their story is as familiar as any the world over. Displaced from their homes because of a war over which they had no control... (Schofield 245)

With conflict causing terror and devastation to overall peace and stability in Kashmir, Kashmiri Pandits feared for their lives. Amid the growing fear and danger they start leaving behind memories of home and hearth; a scenario which had a brutal effect on their collective psyche. Derek Summerfield, an internationally reputed Psychiatrist, thus remarks about the impact of war and conflict on the collective psyche of its victims:

Many studies have indicated that as the overall severity of a disaster or war increased, so did the proportion of the exposed population manifesting psychological disorders. Pre-existing personality factors are obviously capable of shaping the individuals handle such events, but when there is pervasive mental traumatization across whole communities, the distinctions between individual and collective traumas may blur. (Summerfield 161)

In his Sociological study on the impact of migration on Kashmiri Pandits titled *Sociological Implications of Pandit Migration in Jammu and Kashmir* (2008), Kashmiri Sociologist, Prof. Bashir Ahmad Dabla, talks about the different disorders that were caused to Kashmiri Pandit community as a result of migration from their homeland. He writes that:

Our investigation in a migrant camp located around Jammu revealed that 70 to 80 percent migrants have developed depression and other related psychological diseases after they underwent the process of mass migration from Kashmir. Another unofficial estimate revealed that above 55 percent of the KP migrants living in Jammu face complex psychological problems which need the immediate professional treatment on the part of the state government. (Dabla 92-3)

Siddhartha Gigoo reflects on the sense of loss – physical, psychological and social that his community went through reducing them to the status of Internally Displaced Persons. The Pandits had got displaced from their homes and ancestral land leaving them in shock and depression. Gigoo’s literary and non-literary writings are the testimonials of the trauma that the Pandit community faced during and after the migration. In one of his interviews with Anjana Rajan, Siddhartha thus talks about his experiences of the conflict and the subsequent trauma that he and his community faced: The only thing that I had was my memory. In 1990, I was 15 when the whole thing erupted. Overnight it happened; there was militancy, there were disappearances and, finally, there were killings. When the whole thing happened, it was too shocking. I remember it happened on January 19, 1990. I was witnessing the whole thing unfolding layer by layer. (*The Hindu* 2011)

A Fistful of Earth and other stories (2015), a collection of sixteen distinct tormenting stories which articulate deep psychological horrors and saga of Kashmiri Pandits. These stories are a realistic expression of Gigoo’s personal experiences that kept haunting his memory and were finally subjected to artistic expression in these stories. The major theme of *A Fistful of Earth and other stories* is the portrayal of the trauma caused by loss of home. Homelessness for Kashmiri Pandits is directly proportionate to loss of homeland. Each story in the collection is a graphic representation of the trauma of Kashmiri Pandits, their familial memories and their constant longing for the lost home. It is actually a literary representation of the Collective Trauma faced and suffered by a community. Hans Jurgen Wirth in his book *9/11 as a Collective Trauma* (2004) would be relevant to quote while attempting to understand the collective trauma of a community. He writes:

The trauma is accompanied by feelings of extreme fear-frequently, fear of death- terror, powerlessness, and total hopelessness. This leads to a collapse of central functions of the self and a fundamental shock to the entire personality. If this happens to a large group of people at once, it is called collective trauma. (Wirth 38)

The title of Gigoo's short story collection, *A Fistful of Earth and other stories*, signifies the author's lost home and ancestral land. Throughout the collection and the narrative thereof, Gigoo seems to be yearning for that home which he and his community have lost post 1990s. The fate of various characters in the collection, their endless suffering and sorrow and migration highlight the trauma of these characters in the book.

Analysis of select stories from *A Fistful of Earth and other stories*

The first short story in the collection is titled "The Search". The protagonist of the story is an unnamed researcher who researches about the lives of banished people. Written in first person narrative, the story narrates about a researcher who is "interested in the history and biographies of the expelled people". (*A Fistful of Earth* 3) His research takes him to "the library at the Museum of the Disappearing Clans" (2) for data collection and analysis of relevant material. The topic of his research is "The Banished People of Nowhere Kingdom" (4). Noted Kashmiri Pandit poet, Subhash Kak in his poem "Snow in Kashmir", highlights similar fate and trauma of Kashmiri Pandits. He writes:

Who knew then that decades later a terror will come to Srinagar
And I will be unable to see my home where I was born
Where we had played cowries on many new snows.
The terrorists want us to bury our past
Forget the deeds of our ancestors.
We are banished because we remember
Tales that grandfathers told us
Because we remember our story. (Kak 7)

Through the portrayal of the researcher, Gigoo gives vent to his own personal experiences. Gigoo writes: These people were never to know that years after their banishment and subsequent obliteration, the remnants of their memory would be studied, examined or auctioned in places like museums where researchers scrounged for useful information about the people who were made to perish in vain. (4)

Inside the museum the researcher finds old but mysterious objects like clothes, gold items, utensils, photographs, manuscripts, etc., which are being preserved and displayed, "things like manuscripts, letters and clothes were kept in glass enclosures in the museum" (5). These totems, on the one hand, symbolize the entire heritage of a community, and, on the other hand, these objects symbolize the preservation of a memory which could be transferred to their progeny so that they may know their roots, past, identity of the land from which they were banished. Rahul Pandita, another Kashmiri Pandit writer comes up with a similar kind of narrative while he talks about modern Kashmiri Pandits still singing Kashmiri marriage songs on their wedding functions: " But for some, these songs bring a rush of memory"(*Our Moon Has Blood Clots* 210).

Meanwhile the researcher is at the museum library collecting the data for his research on the banished people, he finds a photograph with a bride and a bridegroom in it. The detailing in the story clearly indicate that it is the photograph of a Kashmiri Pandit couple who have migrated from Kashmir and are living a homeless life away from their hearth and home:

A photograph of a bride and a bridegroom under an umbrella bedecked with marigolds intrigued me. The groom was wearing a garland of conch shells. He was handsome. A wide smile, a long nose and a broad forehead set him apart. The bride was wearing a garland of white cardamom pods. Her almond-shaped eyes were beautiful. (10)

The photograph is actually a reflection of the bitter memory, past culture and the unbearable loss in the wake of the armed conflict in the valley. The researcher further discovers some video tapes at the library. While watching the videos and the conversations in them, he cannot not make any sense because of the unknown language used in them. According to the researcher, "Shadowy figures talked unintelligibly, gesticulated and exchanged furtive glances. They performed arcane rituals...They spoke a dead language" (8). By using the terms such as "arcane rituals" and "dead language", Gigoo not only highlights the trauma and the loss suffered by the Pandit community but also focuses on the loss of their language and the culture. In his memoir, Rahul Pandita too talks about the importance of mother tongue in the cultural life of a people, "speaking one's own language meant so much. It filled one with contentment and undefinable happiness" (*Our Moon has Blood Clots* 44).

The author in the story fictionalizes the portrayal of the agonized memories of the banished people and their unflinching yearning to return to their homeland. Gigoo's representation of trauma engenders from being a refugee himself. These traumatic memories kindle an array of emotions which connect past with the present, as Larkin Craig writes, "the past seeps into present whether or not its commemoration is institutionalized" (617).

In one of the video, a woman is excited about her trip to the homeland:

Woman: I am happy at last. They turned out to be the best children. They can't bear me staying all by myself. I shall have a room there. The view is just like the one I wanted.

Man: High-rise skyscrapers?

Woman: No, a garden and a lake. It snows there. (*A Fistful of Earth and other stories* 13)

When the woman in the video says "a garden and a lake. It snows there", Gigoo successfully underscores his community's longing for homes, hearth, orchards and mountains.

Through another video tape that the researcher finds, Gigoo highlights the emotional frustration, disinterest in life, sexual starvation and angst that migrant Pandits faced in refugee camps. The researcher watches the same man and the woman reappearing in the video. Both of them live in a tent. The man enters the tent and notices that it is "dark inside. A scent of ointment wafts through the puny enclosure. He lifts a gigantic pillow". (13) The woman sitting there looks cold and hardly notices his arrival. The man is petrified to see the woman's strange and monster like body as "[h]er body sits on her enormous legs. The soles of her feet are cracked. Her breasts are swollen." (13) The man and the woman has the following conversation:

'What happened to your legs?'

'These will make good firewood. I can't lift them now. They lift me. I have elephantiasis.'

'How did this happen?'

'It is the waiting which has done this to me. Why have you come now?'" (13)

Thus, through the video and the conversations of the man and the woman, Gigoo shows the cost that migrants living in refugee camps paid after circumstances forced them to leave Kashmir in the aftermath of total chaos in Kashmir in 1990s. The story, thus, portrays the invisible wounds done to the psyche of Kashmiri Pandits by the displacement and also shows how they not only remember Kashmir but also long for everything that they had in Kashmir. The story has questions also that deserve attention. The questions raised in the story read as:

Did these people perish because the majority wanted them to go?..

Were these people a cursed lot and condemned to vanish after living a flourishing life for centuries? Did their own pride and misjudgment bring about their downfall? Were they robbed of the ability to distinguish between justice and injustice, nature and science, dream and reality? (7-8)

The next story which the present paper analyses is titled "The Incurable Madness of the Municipal Commissioner", and is from the same collection. Gigoo here foregrounds the insane condition of a Municipal Commissioner by using supernatural elements in the story that haunt the commissioner. According to Trauma scholar and theorist, Ann Whitehead, "Trauma fiction often demands of the reader a suspension of disbelief and novelists frequently draw on the supernatural" (Whitehead 84). The story like the previous one documents the sufferings and traumas of the Pandit community from Kashmir.

As the story opens, the Municipal Commissioner has already lost his mental faculties. A junior officer, who takes his charge, "was shocked at the sudden loss of his boss's mental faculties and struggled to come to terms with it" (*A Fistful of Earth and other stories* 26). Everyone in the office was surprised over "the sudden decay in his mental condition. ... No one had expected the man to go mad overnight. ... he had been an upright officer"(27).

The Municipal Commissioner being a widower and an issueless man, he had a box containing his personal belongings like "photographs, a wallet, land papers, assorted documents, educational certificates, a bracelet, a watch and a personal diary" (27), things that are handed over to the junior officer.

At the mental asylum, the doctors examine and observe the commissioner that he demonstrated a very strange pattern of behavior. Gigoo writes:

There were times during the day when the commissioner demonstrated a seamy behaviour that bordered on the absurd. He would indulge in conversations with himself. At nights, he would sit still, frozen and petrified, and gape at the walls around him and utter, 'Are you dead or alive? Dead and alive are both one.' Then he would cover himself with a blanket and sleep. (28)

The junior officer one day checks the personal belongings of the Commissioner that the box had in it. He finds some documents pertaining to the ownership of the house. As he reads the documents, he finds that the Commissioner is the third person to have purchased a house situated at Nagbal area of Kashmir. The buyers of the house at Nagbal before the Commissioner had resold the house for some unknown reasons. Gigoo thus portrays the mystery of the haunted house:

The papers pertained to the change of ownership of a house that once belonged to a family who had fled Nagbal, a village about forty kilometers from the city...According to the deed, the house had seen three owners after the original inhabitants had fled. None of the owners had lived in it. (28)

The intrigued junior commissioner decides to visit the house his senior commissioner had purchased. As he reaches there, he finds the house in a dilapidated condition and its surroundings wore a deserted look. The “row of abandoned and dilapidated houses” (29) along with the desolate locality mentioned in the story refers to the Pandit houses which they left after the migration. Professor Bashir Ahmad Dabla thus comments on the dilapidated condition of the Pandit colonies:

Since they left Kashmir at the mass level, their colonies looked like ‘ghost colonies’ after their departure. The areas/mohallas which were heavily dominated by the KPs were deserted and it was difficult to find a KP on the roads. (Dabla 68)

The junior commissioner enquires about the owner of the house from a nearby eatery owner who thus replies to his question, “The houses still belong to the original inhabitants. God knows where they are. Their homes will cave in soon. Everything will be gone. A part of history will be erased.” (*A Fistful of Earth* 29)

The junior officer then comes home and decides to read the diary of his senior officer who has gone out of wits. The diary is partially damaged as parts of it had been consumed by the fire that had gutted the house of the commissioner. Written in rough and illegible handwriting, the junior officer has tough time in reading the diary. Whatever portions he manages to read, he starts “copying and typing the passages from the diary on to his computer” (30), and as he finishes typing some portions of the diary, he falls asleep never to wake up again. His wife tries her best to wake him up in the morning but “he didn’t wake up, despite frantic attempts by his wife” (30). The junior officer had breathed his last.

Few days after his death, the wife of the junior commissioner uses his computer and surprisingly finds a document titled “The Commissioner’s Diary” (31) which, in fact, is the title of the story under analysis. The document narrates about the house that the insane senior commissioner had purchased. It mentions about “the intruder” (31) whom the commissioner meets immediately after he purchases the house. The intruder is actually a ghost. The intruder is named Madhusudhan Bhat, a Kashmiri Pandit. He tells the commissioner that he is going to make a movie in which the commissioner would be given a role. The ghost celebrates a festival with the commissioner in his house, which again is a reference to the festivals of Kashmiri Pandits. The diary reads:

He took out a woolen cloak from his bag and put it on. He sat down cross legged in front of the fire he had lit. He took out a handful of walnuts from his bag and placed them inside a brass vessel and then tied a garland of marigolds around the neck of the vessels. Then he poured water into the vessel and put candy into it. He folded his hands and recited a hymn in a language I didn’t understand...Afterwards, he cooked a mutton fish and rice. (31)

The festival and the rituals are clearly a reference to the festival of Shivratri celebrated by Kashmiri Pandits. It is an important festival among the Kashmiri Pandits “which would be celebrated over a period of one week or so. It falls in either February or March, during the severe cold. Preparations would begin a month before” (*Our Moon Has Blood Clots* 26).

As she goes on to read the diary, the ghost is said to be making a few snowmen in the garden as it had snowed heavily because of the winter. He tells the Commissioner that these snowmen are his ancestors and the “tall one is my grandfather...This one is my father” (*A Fistful of Earth* 32). The intruder then gives an “exquisite box made of walnut wood” (33) to the Commissioner and says to him that it is “the box of memories my father wanted me to keep for posterity – for my children and grandchildren”(33) clearly representing the pain of longing and the age-old memories associated with the land.

In his book, *The Exiled Pandits of Kashmir* (2000), Bill K. Koul talks about Kashmiri Pandits and their longing for their homeland:

The valley was Kashmir was their nest, their nursery, their nesting place, their home, their mother! Fortunately or unfortunately, the politically unstable and socially uninhabitable and hostile conditions in the valley, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, compelled most of them to take unplanned flights out of their nests, as birds, to fend for themselves and survive. Everything looked chaotic and hazy, commotion was in the air and individual survival became paramount. (Koul 11-2).

The diary finally solves the mystery behind the Commissioner's madness; it is a telephonic conversation between the Commissioner and the daughter of the ghost, Madhusudhan Bhat who had died in a fire accident which occurred in the house which the Commissioner had purchased. The Commissioner tells the lady that he had bought the house and the ghost of Bhat was living with him. The lady (daughter of the intruder) is astonished to hear the commissioner. Amidst suspicion and disbelief she remarks "my father, Madhusudhan Bhat, passed away five years ago...He died of a heart attack. His last wish was to shoot a film in our old house in Nagbal" (35). The story thereby throws light on the perils of survival in a society caught in conflict and how such circumstances take a toll on the mental health of people. It becomes clear for the readers that the ghost was none other than the apparition of Madhusudhan Bhat who was the actual owner of the house. Roger Luckhurst makes a relevant point in this regard:

The ghost embodied the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory, the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present. Although the ghost as figure of trauma has become a cliché, reinforced as it was throughout the 1990s by an elaborate critical discourse of spectres and spectrality. (Luckhurst 93)

Concluding, the stories in *The Fistful of Earth and other stories* by Siddhartha Gigoo primarily revolve around the migration of the Kashmiri Pandits and are his personal experiences delineating the agony of his community and the plight they suffer. The stories are rooted in their agonies and painful life outside their homeland which makes them more traumatic. The stories reveal the indeible injuries that the Pandit community suffers from as a result of their exile. These stories also shed light on the memories that the community members in exile have about Kashmir and the trauma caused by the exile. It also becomes quite manifest in each of these stories that the amount of longing that the community members nourish for Kashmir further add to their anguish as the long wait for their home is still an unmaterialized dream.

Bibliography:

- 1) Dabla, Bashir Ahmad. *Sociological Implications of Pandit Migration in Jammu and Kashmir*. Jay Kay Books, 2008.
- 2) Kak, Subhash. *The Secrets of Ishber*. Vitasta Publications, 1996.
- 3) Larkin, Craig. "Beyond the War? The Lebanese Postmemory Experience." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2010, pp. 615-35.
- 4) Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
- 5) Pandita, Rahul. *Our Moon has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits*. Random House India, 2013.
- 6) Rajan, Anjana. "Once, when history happened". *The Hindu*. 12 January 2011. <https://www.thehindu.com/books/Once-when-history-happened/article15516754.ece>
- 7) Schofield, Victoria. *Kashmir In The Crossfire*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996.
- 8) Summerfield, Derek. "The Psychosocial Effects of Conflict in the Third World." *Development in Practice*, vol. 1, no. 3, Autumn 1991, pp. 159-73.
- 9) Wirth, Hans-Jürgen. *9/11 as a Collective Trauma: and other Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society*. The Analytic Press, 2004.
- 10) Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh U P, 2004.