

## REVISITING THE REALITY THROUGH THE SELECT STORIES OF SIDDHARTHA GIGOO

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### Abstract

*Kashmiri Pandits' problems are burning issues, which have been the bones of contention between India and Pakistan for more than two decades. Their problems are international issues. Being a minority community in a Muslim majority state, the Kashmiri Pandits' community has been suffering the wrath of the Muslim fundamentalists, and their worries have not ended till today. The exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the valley is an important aspect of the Kashmir conflict that has received scant attention. Indian fiction in English has recently seen enormous growth. In its firmament is one of the greatest Kashmiri Pandit writers, Siddhartha Gigoo. Gigoo has won commonwealth short story prize for his story "The Umbrella Man", which contributes his might to highlight the problems of the Hindu minor community. In a book, A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories, Siddhartha Gigoo elaborately presents a searing account of the displacement, struggle and survival of the community. Through fictional mode, Siddhartha Gigoo artistically brings out the reality that prevails in Kashmir. This paper critically analysis a set of three short stories from his anthology, and shows the sufferings of Kashmiri Pandits.*

**Keywords:** Reminiscence, Immigrant, Fundamentalism, Kashmiri Pandits, Alienation, Riot.

Siddhartha Gigoo penned down what he saw and how he felt certain things from the day he left his home to the present. He echoes the things and narratives which we have been hearing for last twenty years. Most of his stories are about Kashmir, where he was born and spent his wonderful years. The place now is just a faded image. The characters in his stories look back to their native country with pain and reminiscence. Gigoo depicts how the immigrants try to adapt to new country and how they feel rootless. The author has tried to paint the cataclysm of the land he belongs to. The stories talk about living in a society caught in conflict and how this takes a toll on the people and changes their lives. His stories unravel the predicament that people face in conflict regions. In this context, three stories of Siddhartha Gigoo are taken here to show how far he succeeds in presenting the real agony of characters pregnant with remembering and hence resurrecting bits of their histories which their memories preserve.

### (i) POISON, NECTAR

Siddhartha Gigoo splendidly pictures the problems of the pundit's family in a puny canvas. The story "Poison, Nectar" depicts the difficulties of a routine life of a Kashmiri Pandit family in a refugee camp. An old man, exiled from his native place, dies without proper treatment in a tiny tattered tent which is not enough for two persons but has been housing a family of four grown-ups; based on this story Gigoo directed his short film the Last day. The story is set against the backdrop of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland, Kashmir. The exiles lived in wretched conditions in the canvas tents in migrant camps for more than two decades (1990-2011) and continue to be. Several old men and women perished because of mental and physical ailments.

Lalit lives with his family members in a tent, which is given by the government for the migrants, they accept to live inside a camp tent even in the hot sultry summer, Lalit's half-paralyzed bedridden father smiles only when his neighbour retired Headmaster and his granddaughter visit him. One morning pensioner brings the news of Governor's visits to deliver the speech to the migrants; Lalit's wife sadly says "Will the governor first replace these horrible tents in which we have been living for the past for years?"(41). Gigoo shows how the people living in the camp yearning for house to lead a peaceful life. The condition of the migrants in the camp is beautifully picturized in the story, the migrants accept to live in a tattered canvas by expecting a new life. Lalit's father only has a bed to sleep others sleep on the floor, Lalit's wife craves for bed, always dreams for her own bed. Lalit's mother used to stitch the torn fabric of the tented home with an old needle, which is her prized possession she carried during the exodus. Lalit's wife mocks at their condition "a needle and some thread are we need to repair our home" (43).

Everyone feels that their life is conquered by fear and finds there is no way to escape, Headmaster's words picture their fear "We left out of fear and now there is no freedom from fear. Freedom has become a prison for

us,” (43). Lalit’s wife fed up with their marital relationship and starts complaining about their condition, Lalit tries to mend their broken marital relationship, spending time with some idlers in the camp is the only solace for him. Lalit’s wife has to fetch water from far end of the camp, her neighbours envy her for living without the pestering of the children, but she always thinks that having children is far better than to taking care of bed-ridden father-in-law, she craves for personal space and fears of becoming old. Lalit’s family always remains silent in the camp; they stopped to talk with one another for a long time.

Lalit is cynical about the political drama but accompanies the Headmaster to listen to the speech because the Headmaster convince him that the Governor is going to announce the new scheme for the migrants to relieve them from miseries. The migrants eagerly listen to the speech without considering the hot summer, but the Governor totally forgot his promise to help them to relocate to their own houses, instead of that he starts to boast about his Government and their hardships to setup another camp. After hearing the speech the people start to feel “He wants to relocate us to another camp now. What about the promise he made to us two years ago to give our homes back to us? Has he forgotten his promise?”(47). they were fed up with the fake promises and think that there is no way for them to live in their own land.

At a long distance Lalit sees the place where they want to go back, he felt uneasy whenever happens to see that place, the memory of which is in shreds now. He rethinks the beauty of that place once again and calls the tunnel, which separates the valley from the mainland, is the tunnel of forgetfulness. When the Governor finished his speech the group of men carried the dead body of an old man to cremate, the dead man’s family felt relieved after his death. Gigoo artistically shows the fact in a fictionalized mode, how the second generation long for the death of first generation, they think their parents are good for nothing and want to live their life without the tortures of parents.

Lalit meets the doctor on his way from the speech; he starts to enquire about his mother’s health without bearing her sufferings “Lalit had never given it a passing thought. What was it that eating his mother up from within? Was it her husband’s health? Was it homelessness? Was it life in the tent? Was it the heat? Was it the loss of her home, her only kingdom in this world? Was there a way of knowing her thought and feelings?” (50). After the mass exodus everyone in the family forgot to smile, they are unable to think beyond their sufferings and needs. Lalit realizes his mistakes only after his father’s death, not caring his parents and wife for the life of debauchery. The dead father lies “the blistering sores on the old man’s had turned ashen under the palms of his wife. His last smile remained cupped in her hands forever!” (53) Lalit’s wife understood some changes in her husband when he caressed her in the lone night. Lalit thinks his wife and mother will be free and live for new desires without spending their whole day for the bed-ridden father. The story explores the themes of loss of memory, privacy, physical intimacy and identity, shattered human relationships, fears and longing in the lives of the exiled families who spent decades in scrawny 8x 10 canvas tents. There was nowhere else to go. No homes, no security, no love, no hope! Just an endless waiting, battling alienation and anxiety! The exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits is one of the most tragic episodes in the history of Kashmir in modern India. Even now, Kashmir continues to be a boiling flashpoint in India.

## (II) “SLEEP ROBBERS”

The story “Sleep Robbers” is a heart wrenching story set in Kashmir, the author doesn’t name the place but the reader can guess. Where a boy mourns the death of his friend named Firdaus. He observes that this untimely death has shattered his friend’s parents, but in order to save their own lives from the state agencies, his friend’s father disowns his own dead son branding him a disgrace to their family. Siddhartha Gigoo starts this story with a beautiful description of the surroundings; everyday Firdaus family is tortured by the fundamentalists to reveal the secret, which is known by their only son named Firdaus. The young boy narrates the story, he was struggled to sleep and thinks about the burial of his close friend named Firdaus. The narrator planned to visit the Firdaus parents to pay his condolence, he is burdened with the memory of his friend and tries to seek refuge by thinking his childhood memories. Of his friends Firdaus only enamoured of small adventures, one day he disappeared without informing others, the narrator comes to know from one of his friends that Firdaus is taken away to a faraway place by someone.

After two days the narrator visits Firdaus house and finds some confusion prevailing in the house, leaves the house with lot of questions in his mind. One day he notices four men depart from his friend’s house by making bad criticism about the insanitary condition of the drains in the locality and starts to watch them in close quarters. To discover the secret prevailing in the house he visits them once again and notices so many changes in the house, out of Firdaus mother’s request he accepted to stay in their house for few days. While hearing Firdaus father’s conversation with the neighbour he develops his curiosity to unravel the mystery. The next day the narrator finds that four strangers demanded Firdaus father to reveal the particulars of a person, whose details Firdaus only knew “Your son knew about the task. You can’t fool us. What about the day when he telephoned you? You had said that he wanted to confide something in you” (170).

The author shows the inhumanity and extremism of fundamentalists and how they torture a innocent people to get rid of their enemies. They start to behave like a chameleon to accomplish their task. After they depart Firdaus mother feels for their life “Do you wish. There won’t be any peace for me in this lifetime” (170). Firdaus

father also depressed and babbles “How does it matter now? Is there no way of getting rid of these pests? Do we have to live with this for our entire lives? Is there no sleep for us?” (171) they lost their hope for future and trapped in the strange circumstance. The next morning the narrator shares his dream of Firdaus waking him to go for camping trip to Nagbal with Firdaus’ mother; she praises the narrator’s parents for their son’s good nature.

The narrator feels the unsettling of calm in the house, the outsiders’ barge into the house; they started their rude enquiry, without bearing the tortures Firdaus’ father accepts stone heartedly “It is our fault. The boy was a spoilt brat. We seek forgiveness. He didn’t leave on his own. He was wayward and we threw him out of the house. He vowed never to return. And kept his promise” (172). Even the neighbour starts to blame Firdaus by saying “No one here even mourned his death. He was a burden to his parents. He brought them shame. It is the truth” (172). The narrator wonders after hearing those details about his friend revealed by his father, the only thing the narrator knew about his friend is he wants to have a sister, suddenly the narrator remembers Firdaus remarks about the armoured convoy in his school days “These people have been brought in to crush us” (173). Firdaus mother becomes fragile and seeks forgiveness from God for their statement about their son, Firdaus father also feels for speaking ill of his only son “Firdaus was a good son. He would never have thought of hurting anyone. Let them think whatever they want to think about him” (172). The author paints the mindset of the outsiders and how they expect their demands to be met and the questions answered. The demands of the outsiders force Firdaus’ parents to quit their life. Unable to do anything the narrator left the Firdaus house at the end.

### (III). “THE LAST HAIRCUT”

Siddhartha Gigoo in his short story “The Last Haircut” projects the problems faced by the Kashmiri pandits’ family during the riot. The story is the depiction of time in Kashmir when the Pandits were facing persecution. Two young boys are given the task of killing their teacher who is a Kashmiri Pandit. The story highlights the period in Kashmir in 1989-1990 when Hindu families were leaving their homes after selective killings of their community members. Woma and Wasdev is a pandit couple lives in Kashmir, Wasdev is a school teacher, it was the day of Kavpunim, and they celebrated the birthday of the crow. Woma waits for her husband to come from barbershop, she starts to pack their things in a hurried manner on that time she hears the spiteful knocking at the door, two teenagers engaged nervously, Woma greets them and asks to sit inside the house. One of them asks whereabouts of Wasdev and informs “we are his students. We want to talk to him about an assignment” (36). The real meaning of the word assignment is the conspiracy of the commander. Woma asks them to sit in a corner of the house, and starts her packing work, on seeing it one of the boys asked “are you going somewhere” (37). Woma is unaware of the awaiting danger but wasdev knows it before and ordered his wife to pack their belongings to escape from that place. In-between her conversation with them, she informs them about the arrival of two other students to visit her husband for the assignments, the talkative boy from the two husked into his friend’s ear “They must be from section B” (38). Gigoo reveals the secret of how teenagers in Kashmir are misguided by the fundamentalist for their benefits.

Woma’s statement “His students have assured that nothing untoward will happen to us after what happened to Dina, I worry about my husband” (38). Gigoo brings out the problems faced by the Kashmiri pandit teachers. Woma bolts the house after their departure and starts her work. The next day the students meet the commander in his place, the commander enters the place with two other boys they shows no emotions on their eyes, the talkative boy hides his fright of unaccomplished duty, the commander thundered “The mission is accomplished, your next assignment will be more difficult. But I am sure victory will be yours. Your reward awaits you! The commander went on” (39). Gigoo shows how the life of Kashmiri pandit teachers are destroyed by the Muslim fundamentalist and also how they poisoned the younger generations to achieve and develops their mission. Woma awaits her husband’s arrival without knowing his death. Gigoo uses Woma to show the stoic nature of pandit’s women and their innocence amidst the problems.

Gigoo beautifully projects how the innate sense of loss, despair, profound grief and sorrow that haunt in each one of the stories. He also portrays the dilemma of the characters during and after the riot. Gigoo as a victim of ethnic cleansing happened in Kashmir brings the fictionalized fact in his stories. Gigoo mixes the real life incidents with his fictional characters to make impact on the mind of his readers. His beautiful craftsmanship helps the readers to understand the real problem happening in Kashmir and also makes them to feel, they too live in the world of conflict.

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