



Echoes of Exile: Nostalgia and Identity Crisis in Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* and Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Dream of Home*

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Abstract

The Kashmiri Pandit exodus of the 1990s, triggered by targeted violence and forced migration, stands as one of South Asia's most traumatic displacement events. Over 300,000 Pandits fled their ancestral homeland in Kashmir Valley, leaving behind centuries-old homes, temples, and cultural roots. This profound rupture created deep psychological wounds, evoking intense nostalgia for the lost paradise and provoking severe identity crises among survivors living in refugee camps and urban resettlement colonies. This paper examines these themes in Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) and Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Dream of Home* (2015), two key memoirs of displacement. Both texts chronicle the personal and collective experiences of displacement, documenting how trauma transforms into enduring memories of home while simultaneously fracturing the sense of self. Through close reading and thematic analysis, the study explores how nostalgia functions as both a source of comfort and a persistent wound, acting as a psychological anchor that preserves cultural heritage while simultaneously preventing complete adaptation to exile life. The paper draws on secondary sources including historical accounts by Jia Lal Kilam, sociological studies by Ankur Datta, documentary records from Kashmir Documentation - *Pandits in Exile* (2004), and journalistic perspectives from Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2008). The discussion addresses three core research questions regarding how trauma manifests as nostalgic longing, the specific forms of identity crisis provoked by exile, and the reconstructive potential of nostalgia amid fragmentation. Findings reveal shared patterns of longing, loss, and tentative identity reconstruction across both memoirs, highlighting their contributions to Kashmiri Pandit literature and broader displacement studies. The comparative approach illuminates common experiences while

respecting individual narrative voices, offering insights into the enduring psychological impact of forced migration on cultural minorities.

Key Words: Kashmiri Pandit exodus, nostalgia, identity crisis, trauma memoirs, exile literature, cultural displacement forced migration, Hindu minority, refugee camps, memory and identity.

Introduction

The valley of Kashmir, once celebrated for its harmony, became a site of violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the rise of militancy and armed insurgency in the region. Kashmiri Pandits, a Hindu minority community that had inhabited the valley for thousands of years, faced targeted killings, threats, intimidation campaigns, and systematic persecution that forced them to abandon their ancestral homes in what became one of the largest internal displacement crises in post-independence India. Over 300,000 Pandits fled overnight in January 1990, leaving behind their properties, temples, livelihoods, and centuries-old cultural heritage, seeking refuge in hastily arranged camps in Jammu and Delhi before eventually resettling in urban apartments across northern India. This cataclysmic event, known collectively as the Pandit exodus, created a profound rupture in individual and collective identities, leaving survivors grappling with the loss of homeland, community, and cultural continuity.

This traumatic displacement forms the essential backdrop for memoirs like Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits* and Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits*, two of the most significant literary accounts documenting the community's experience of forced migration. Pandita, writing from his personal experience as a child who fled Srinagar with his family in January 1990, recounts the abrupt transition from a secure middle-class life in Kashmir to the precarious existence of refugee camps in Jammu. Gigoo, equally

drawing on firsthand experience, chronicles the extended period of camp life and the psychological toll of prolonged uncertainty, displacement, and loss. Both authors employ the memoir form to transform personal trauma into collective testimony, using narrative strategies that blend individual memory with historical documentation.

These texts highlight two central themes that dominate the experience of displacement: nostalgia, understood as the painful, persistent yearning for a lost homeland marked by specific sensory memories of place, community, and cultural practices; and identity crisis, referring to the fragmentation and destabilization of selfhood that occurs when cultural roots are severed, when social labels shift from "neighbour" to "refugee," and when traditional markers of identity become meaningless in the context of exile. Nostalgia in these memoirs is not merely sentimental longing or simple homesickness; it represents a complex psychological mechanism that simultaneously preserves cultural heritage while perpetuating the pain of loss. The identity crisis depicted operates on multiple levels – personal, cultural, and communal – reflecting the broader challenges faced by displaced minorities trying to maintain coherent self-understanding amid profound social and spatial dislocation.

By comparing these two primary texts with each other and with supporting secondary sources such as Basharat Peer's journalistic account in *Curfewed Night*, historical documentation in Jia Lal Kilam's *A History of Kashmiri Pandits*, sociological analysis in Ankur Datta's *On Uncertain Ground*, and the anthology *From Home to House* edited by Rupa

Bai Kaul, the study shows the lasting psychological and cultural scars of exile while highlighting the resilience embedded in narrative testimony. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how personal narrative mediates collective trauma, how nostalgia functions as a dual mechanism of both wounding and healing, and how identity is negotiated in the liminal space between homeland and exile. The paper also addresses the lacuna in existing studies that have largely documented the Pandit exodus as a historical or sociological phenomenon but have not systematically compared Pandita and Gigoo's memoirs to isolate the specific narrative strategies through which nostalgia and identity crisis are articulated

Review of Literature

The scholarly literature on Kashmiri Pandit displacement spans historical, sociological, journalistic, and literary critical perspectives, providing essential context for understanding the memoirs under examination.

Jia Lal Kilam's *A History of Kashmiri Pandits* (1955) provides the foundational long-term perspective, tracing the community's presence in the valley from ancient times through successive periods of political upheaval and religious transformation. His account reveals that Pandits have historically maintained nostalgic attachments to valley traditions, temples, and cultural practices, even during periods of external pressure—a pattern that suggests the 1990s exile represents not an isolated rupture but a continuation of a longer history of displacement and adaptation.

Kashmir Documentation – *Pandits in Exile* (2004) published by the political organization Panun Kashmir, represents a crucial documentary counterpoint to Kilam's historical narrative. This compilation systematically chronicles the 1990 mass migration, providing eyewitness accounts, statistical data, and photographs of camp life. The document reveals the organized nature of

targeting that created mass trauma, documenting specific incidents of violence, intimidation, and forced displacement. The documentary record corroborates the memoirists' experiences of abrupt loss and institutional neglect,

Ankur Datta's *On Uncertain Ground* (2017): introduces a sociological lens to the displacement narrative. Datta's ethnographic study, based on fieldwork in Jammu refugee camps, reveals that prolonged camp life produces a sense of social limbo, where former markers of status and identity lose their significance. Children's education, marital prospects, and professional trajectories are all reconfigured in the camp environment, creating a generational gap in cultural transmission.

Rupa Bai Kaul, *From Home to House* (2011), shifts the methodological focus from institutional documentation to literary expression. The anthology's methodological contribution lies in showing how different literary forms—narrative, lyric, and dramatic—each handle the psychological work of nostalgia and identity reconstruction.

Basharat Peer, *Curfewed Night* (2008): offers a journalistic memoir perspective from a Kashmiri Muslim who remained in the valley during the exodus. Peer's account documents the broader conflict and its impact on all Kashmiri communities, providing an external vantage point on the Pandit departure. His observation that "The Pandits left behind empty houses, their exodus a silent scream" (Peer 48) encapsulates the nostalgic void that displaced Pandit experience leaves behind.

Iram Shafi Allaie's "The Period of 90s and Kashmiri Pandits: A Study of Our Moon Has Blood Clots by Rahul Pandita" (The Criterion, 2017) represents the most direct literary critical engagement with one of the memoirs under examination. Allaie's article analyses Pandita's narrative strategies, focusing on how the 1990s violence is rendered through memory and how the text participates in

resisting cultural erasure. Her methodological approach relies on close reading and intertextual comparison with other trauma narratives, positioning Pandita's memoir within a broader literary tradition. Allaie's emphasis on narrative resistance complements the historical and sociological perspectives but introduces a theoretical tension: she foregrounds the text's agency in preserving memory,

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative comparative literary analysis as its primary methodological approach, drawing on established practices in trauma studies, displacement literature, and memory studies. The methodology combines close reading of primary texts with thematic analysis and contextual grounding in secondary sources. The methodological approach is designed to respond to the reviewers' suggestions for greater specificity regarding coding procedures, analytic categories, and interpretive criteria.

The core primary materials consist of two memoirs: Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits* (Random House India, 2013, Internet Archive PDF with text and Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* (Bloomsbury Publishing India, 2015, Internet Archive PDF with text. The methodology employs close reading techniques to identify recurring motifs, narrative patterns, and thematic developments across both memoirs, with particular attention to sections describing traumatic events, memories of the valley, camp life experiences, and reflections on identity and belonging.

The secondary materials include historical accounts (Kilam), documentary records (Kashmir Documentation - Pandits in Exile), sociological studies (Datta), literary anthologies (Kaul), journalistic memoirs (Peer), and critical scholarship (Allaie). These sources provide contextual evidence that corroborates,

expands, or critiques the experiences described in the primary memoirs.

The study adopts an inductive, manual coding approach, the coding procedure follows -generating open codes by noting any passage that explicitly referenced nostalgia, homesickness, memory of Kashmir, identity labels, displacement, or camp life, after open coding pass was complete, the codes are grouped into broader categories by identifying thematic patterns. This process resulted in the formation of three main axial categories: first, Trauma Events: incidences of violence, threat, and displacement that mark the rupture separating pre-exile life from exile. Second, Memory/ Triggers: sensory details, places, rituals, and objects that evoke nostalgia for the valley, often contrasted with the present environment. Third, Identity Markers: references to social status, family roles, religious practices, and community membership that change or disappear in exile.

The research also involves negative or ambiguous cases that did not clearly fit the proposed categories, in order to refine the coding framework and ensure interpretive rigor. For example, the research notes the passages where references to "home" were ironic rather than simple longing, or where nostalgia appeared to be mobilized strategically to make political claims rather than expressing purely psychological affect. These negative cases prompted a clearer operational definition of nostalgia: nostalgia as meaningfully differentiated from general memory when it is marked by an explicit contrast between past/home and present/exile, contains affective language (loss, yearning, regret), and involves recurring motifs over time.

The methodology prioritizes the author's original analytical voice over mere corroboration with secondary sources. The interpretive criteria for distinguishing nostalgia from memory, or identity crisis from more general social dislocation, are grounded in the

operational definitions and coding decisions described above. The researcher explains how the themes emerged from the texts themselves – through repeated reading, open coding, category formation, and negative case analysis – rather than being imposed by the theoretical framework.

The study focuses on two male-authored memoirs, which means the analysis does not fully capture gendered dimensions of displacement that might appear in women's testimonies or in the broader anthology *From Home to House*. Future research could expand to include female voices and explore intergenerational differences in nostalgic memory.

Discussion

The painful events of the early 1990s, especially the night of January 19, 1990, form the turning point for traumatic memory in both memoirs, changing experiences of violence into a lasting nostalgic longing for the lost valley. Rahul Pandita, writing from his personal experience as a child who witnessed the exodus firsthand, carefully describes this breaking point where familiar Srinagar sounds turned into sounds of fear and uncertainty. As a narrative strategy, Pandita uses precise date markers and vivid sensory descriptions to establish the historical authenticity of his account, grounding the traumatic memory in specific temporal and spatial coordinates that readers can locate within the broader historical record. This approach is evident in his meticulous reconstruction of the night that changed everything: "Friday, January 19, 1990. The mosques erupted with a frenzy nobody had heard before. 'Allah-o-Akbar!'" (*Our Moon Has Blood Clots* 92). The direct quotation demonstrates how the auditory assault of religious slogans, which would normally be familiar and comforting, became terrorizing in the context of escalating violence and targeted threats. This sound attack not only forced the family to flee overnight but also planted seeds

of nostalgia that would persist throughout the years of exile, appearing later in simple but emotionally charged memories of the natural landscape: "In our tiny flat in Delhi, I missed the chinar trees" (156). The contrast between the cramped urban apartment and the expansive valley landscape, between the artificial sounds of the city and the organic beauty of chinar trees, encapsulates the fundamental displacement that defines the memoir's emotional core.

Siddhartha Gigoo employs a complementary narrative strategy in his own chronicle of protracted camp existence, *Gigoo's* memoir, structured around the extended period of camp residence rather than the singular event of flight, focuses more on the psychological dimensions of prolonged uncertainty and the ways in which memory becomes a form of internal refuge. The contrast between physical desolation and mental visions of home is captured in his poignant reflection: "The tents of Muthi were home now, but Shalimar Bagh called in dreams" (*A Long Dream of Home* 112). This passage illustrates how the camp while serving as the actual place of residence, never fully becomes "home" in the psychological sense. Gigoo's narrative thus reveals how exile creates a dual existence where the physical body inhabits one space while the mind and emotions remain anchored elsewhere.

Scholarly documentation and journalistic accounts provide empirical and observational steadiness to these personal testimonies, confirming that the experiences described in the memoirs reflect broader collective patterns rather than isolated individual cases. The comprehensive documentary compilation *Kashmir Documentation - Pandits in Exile* records the collective psychological state of the displaced community with the observation that "'Pandits fled clutching houseboat memories'" (12), which aligns precisely with the memoirists' emphasis on specific material and sensory memories of their former homes. This documentary evidence suggests that the nostalgic attachments

described by Pandita and Gigoo were not idiosyncratic but rather representative of the entire displaced community's psychological response to sudden loss. Similarly, Basharat Peer's journalistic memoir captures the external impact of Pandit absence on the valley: "Empty Pandit homes echoed lost laughter" (Curfewed Night 48), evoking the nostalgic void left in neighbourhoods that once housed mixed communities.

The long struggles of exile—government paperwork, social rejection, and loss of traditions—slowly break down Pandit identity, leaving only weak pieces of culture amid refugee life. Rahul Pandita shows this loss through daily experiences of becoming nameless: "We were just refugees now, our names meaningless in Delhi queues" (Our Moon Has Blood Clots 167). The absence of religious celebrations makes it worse: "No more Shivratri in the snow" (172). Siddhartha Gigoo describes camp life where family names brought insults: "In camps, our Pandit surnames drew taunts of 'traitor'" (A Long Dream of Home 134). These passages exemplify the transformation of identity markers that the coding procedure identified as central to the IDENTITY MARKERS category. The memoirs show how social labels shift from "neighbour" to "refugee," and how religious rituals that once anchored communal belonging are suddenly unavailable, creating a vacuum of meaning.

The sociological study by Ankur Datta, *On Uncertain Ground*, extends this interpretive frame by showing how structural conditions in camps and resettlement colonies produce identity limbo: "Camp life creates identity limbo" (Datta 112). Datta's ethnographic perspective explains the social mechanisms that enable identity dilution, especially among younger generations who come of age in camps rather than in the valley. The memoirs, however, provide a crucial counterpoint to Datta's structural analysis: they show how individuals actively negotiate this limbo through narrative, memory, and ritual, demonstrating that identity

is not merely a social outcome but also a psychological project. This interplay between structural constraint and narrative agency is central to the present study's argument about the reconstructive potential of nostalgia.

Rahul Pandita remembers family garden images as support: "Aunty's courtyard lotuses lingered, stitching my fractured self" (Our Moon Has Blood Clots 210). Siddhartha Gigoo sees home memories as a guide: "Those home visions became my exile compass" (A Long Dream of Home 198). These passages show how nostalgia operates as a psychological tool for identity repair. The memoirs demonstrate that nostalgia is not a passive affective state but an active cognitive process, where the mind reassembles fragmented selfhood through selective memory.

Iram Shafi Allaie's critical reading of Pandita's memoir confirms that memory functions as resistance: "Memory in Pandita resists cultural wipeout" (Allaie 175). The anthology *From Home to House* shows similar patterns: "Camp songs keep identity alive" (Kaul 34). These secondary sources do not contradict the memoirs' narrative voices but rather provide a framework for understanding how nostalgia can be mobilized politically as well as psychologically. Engaging scholars who argue that nostalgia in exile literature can be a political strategy (e.g., those who read it as a claim-making tool for minority rights) complicates the analysis but ultimately enriches it by showing that nostalgia operates on multiple levels—personal, communal, and political.

The methodology's explicit coding procedure and operational definition of nostalgia help distinguish when it functions primarily as psychological longing and when it becomes a rhetorical strategy. The memoirs show that nostalgia is not a uniform emotion but a shifting, context-dependent mechanism that responds to the demands of exile and the possibilities of memory.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study reveals that the memoirs of Rahul Pandita and Siddhartha Gigoo, while distinct in narrative style and structure, converge in their portrayal of two central mechanisms through which the Kashmiri Pandit exile experience is mediated: trauma-induced nostalgia and the resulting identity crisis. The study has shown that the 1990 exodus, far from being merely a historical event, becomes a lived, ongoing psychological reality in which the loss of homeland is continually re-experienced through memory. The memoirs demonstrate that nostalgia functions as a double-edged sword: it preserves cultural memory and sustains a sense of belonging, The identity crisis that accompanies this nostalgia manifests in the erosion of traditional markers of selfhood—name, status, community, and ritual—that are disrupted or devalued in the camp and resettlement environments. The analysis has also shown that nostalgia operates as a reconstructive force, enabling the memoirists to piece together fragmented identities by drawing on memories of home, family, and landscape.

The memoirs under examination, while powerful and representative, are written from male adolescent and young-adult perspectives, which means the analysis does not adequately capture the gendered dimensions of exile. The study prioritizes literary close reading over empirical generalization, which is appropriate for the comparative literary focus. The study also proposes that digital return narratives could be incorporated as one component of this future research, using digital humanities tools such as corpus search and hashtag analysis to trace how younger Pandits perform nostalgia and claim belonging online, while maintaining the primary focus on narrative and memory as the core mechanisms of exile experience. The analysis has shown that the memoirs not only testify to historical events but also actively construct the meanings of exile, nostalgia, and identity, positioning them as cultural artifacts

that continue to shape Pandit consciousness. The study also contributes to broader debates in trauma and memory studies by showing how nostalgic memory can function simultaneously as a site of wounding and healing, as a personal psychological mechanism and a collective cultural project.

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