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The Unhomely Nation: Internal Exile and Kashmiri Pandit Literary Narratives

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Abstract
The exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley in 1990 is considered as one of the most painful and least explored episodes of internal displacement in modern India. Forced to leave their homes by violence and intimidation, thousands of families became refugees within the borders of their own nation. Their displacement raises a haunting question: how do citizens become homeless in a democratic state that constitutionally promises to protect them? This paper examines this paradox through the narratives of Kashmiri Pandits that transform displacement into testimony and resistance. The forced displacement created a condition of internal exile marked by loss of home, identity, and culture. For the Kashmiri Pandits, home is simultaneously near yet unreachable. Their citizenship offers legal recognition to them, but it fails to ensure emotional or territorial belonging. Memoirs and novels by authors such as Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, T. N. Dhar, and Rohit Tikoo bear testimony to the ways in which memory becomes the only homeland left to inhabit. Using insights from postcolonial and trauma theory, the paper argues that the Kashmiri Pandit narratives reveal the contradictions of Indian democracy, where inclusion and exclusion operate simultaneously. The unhomely nation is not just a metaphor for exile; it is a lived experience that poses fundamental questions about national belonging and unsettles dominant ideas of secularism.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandit displacement, internal exile, Indian secularism, citizenship and belonging, trauma narratives, postcolonial India

Introduction
Displacement and exile have been the recurring themes that have shaped human history, affecting not only the daily lives of the people but also the way literature has evolved. Exile, if we consider the broadest sense of this word, is far from being just an impersonal relocation from the place where one comes from rather a deep psychological and cultural condition. Edward Said, in Reflections on Exile, describes exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (Said 173).

Historical Context: Political Upheaval and the Rise of Militancy in Kashmir (1980-1990)
The Kashmiri Pandit exodus exemplifies a form of forced internal displacement that exposes the limits of India's democratic and secular framework. With the rise of militancy in the Kashmir Valley towards the end of the 1980s, communal tensions flared up and violence against minority groups became common. The Pandits, a Hindu Brahmin community tracing their roots back to the Valley for over a thousand years, were the ones who suffered most as their socio, economic status, cultural visibility, and political involvement made them easy targets. Militancy generated a climate of fear by means of assassinations, intimidation, and propaganda, forcing families to vacate their homes. By April 1990, according to official reports, nearly the entire community had evacuated, with some 33,618 families being registered as displaced (Ranjan and Tikoo 72). The exile was sudden, with families having to leave homes, temples, orchards, and individual belongings behind, turning the Pandits into internal refugees living in uncertain and frequently insecure, conditions.
The effects of such displacement were multi-faceted. Families lost property, livelihoods, and social networks. Socially, the exile disrupted traditional communal hierarchies, joint family setups, and cultural rituals. Psychologically, people became victims of trauma generated by violent threats and by the sudden disruption of their familial environment.

This displacement also took a toll on the collective identity; the Pandits' close relationship with the Valley- its topography, places of worship, and historic temples- was disrupted, creating a severe cultural and spiritual dislocation. Being displaced in one's own nation underscores the paradox of internal displacement. The Pandits were physically uprooted from their home, but still remained citizens of India and subjected to material deprivation and erasure within policy and public discourse.

Migration studies distinguish between voluntary and involuntary movements. Forced exile, on the other hand, is caused by political violence, persecution, or threat to existence. The distinction is key to the comprehension of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus of 1990. Avtar Brah highlights the imagery of diaspora as a "homing desire," where displaced groups negotiate constantly between memory, history, and identity (Brah 193).

The 1980s in Jammu and Kashmir saw extreme political upheaval, social unrest, and the rise of militancy resulting in a very volatile atmosphere which dramatically influenced the Kashmiri Pandit community. The politics of Kashmir were marked by disputed governance and an increasing demand for autonomy within a socially and religiously divided society. Although Kashmir saw moments of relative tranquillity and some political integration under the Indian Constitution, during the late 1980s the public's confidence in democratic processes witnessed a sharp decline. Allegations of electoral corruption and state ineffectiveness contributed to widespread political disillusionment in this region (Kaul 44-45).

The 1987 state legislative elections proved to be a watershed moment in Kashmir's political life. Broadly seen as rigged and controversial, these elections resulted in the National Conference-Congress alliance forming the government, a victory challenged by the opposition and sections of civil society. Scholars such as Ranjan and Tikoo opine that the systematic manipulation of democratic mechanisms delegitimized the authority of the state in the perception of most Kashmiris, especially the Muslim community, who increasingly felt that participation in elections was meaningless (Ranjan and Tikoo 72). This disillusionment also led to the radicalization of political discourse, which provided a conducive environment for the emergence of militant groups.

The militancy in Kashmir at this time did not exist in a vacuum; it evolved in response to both domestic issues and larger regional influences. Growing visibility of Islamic fundamentalist thought, along with networking among support groups that traversed the border, allowed militant groups to capitalize on communal and political unrest. These groups, particularly Hizbul Mujahideen, Jamaat-e-Islami, and other Islamist groups, defined a vision of Kashmiri identity that did not include non-Muslim populations, specifically the Pandits, whom they saw as agents or Indian state collaborators (Kaul 46; Ranjan and Tikoo 73). Kashmiri Pandits, a minority Hindu community in the Valley, have been a community that was different not only in terms of the social but also the political from the rest of the populace. They were among the few groups which held lands and were largely represented in the fields of education, administration, and civil services. As such they were the socially influential class and were also relatively economically secure. But it was their prominence and close association with the government institutions that made them the most vulnerable target in the environment of increasing unrest (Pandita 85).

Targeted Violence: The Systematic Campaign Against Kashmiri Pandits

The targeting of Kashmiri Pandits was not spontaneous but a systematic strategy aimed at generating mass fear and enable both cultural and demographic displacement. Threats, propaganda, and public intimidation were the defining tactics. Militant groups circulated pamphlets, posters, and letters demanding the Pandits to vacate their homes immediately. These messages often gave stark choices—conversion, exile, or death, and emphasized the deadly ramifications of defiance (Pandita 89-90). The late 1980s witnessed an increase in acts of violence that were specifically directed against Kashmiri Pandits. Among the earliest and most representative incidents was the killing of Tika Lal Taploo, a leading lawyer and political activist on 13 September 1989. Taploo's killing was a typical example of the evil plan that was used to frighten the Pandit community, and it showed that the militants did not hesitate to kill those who were not only socially prominent and politically active but also well, integrated in society (Kaul 47). A series of such attacks ensued, ransacking the homes and murdering the officers, teachers, and other professionals, thus, consolidating the feeling of terror and the lack of safety.

Pandit-owned homes and shops were vandalized or set on fire, temples and schools were threatened or attacked. Scholars contend that these actions were intended to produce both psychological terror and functional displacement by undermining the community's ability to stay in the Valley (Ranjan and Tikoo 75). By the beginning of 1990, the cumulative consequences of militant violence, political disenfranchisement, and intimidation over a long period had made the Pandit families feel that their lives were in danger. The death threat issued by Hizbul Mujahideen on 14 April 1990, in which it was ordered that Pandits leave the Valley within two days or be killed, sharply brought about the mass exodus (Pandita 89-90). Thousands of families, therefore, left their ancestral homes, the means of their livelihood, and their property, in most cases with only a few of their belongings, so they could escape the area. Reports of that time tell of the fleeing in a hurry, the temporary camps in Jammu and other places where they had to move, and the beginning of their great psychological trauma and uncertainty that would last for a long time.

The political and social environment in Kashmir before 1990 was basically a mix of electoral instability, increasing militancy, and communal tensions, which had a direct impact on the Kashmiri Pandit community. The initiation of targeting, intimidation, and violence made the atmosphere so that the forced fleeing was the natural outcome of it. It is essential to combine the works of literature concerning the Pandit exile with this background to recognize the interrelation of the past, the trauma of the mind, and the disappearance of the culture that is the basis of the literary representation of the deprivation, longing, and identity.

The Mechanics of Displacement: Physical, Psychological, and Social Dimensions

The Kashmiri Pandit exodus of 1990 was certainly not an unplanned event or isolated instance of physical relocation. Rather, it was the culmination of an intricate process in

which socio-political, psychological, and cultural factors converged to force the Pandits out of the Valley. Displacement under such circumstances must be understood as a multidimensional process involving physical uprooting, psychological shock, and the disintegration of long-established social and cultural frameworks. Central to this process was the persistent threat of bodily harm. Islamist militant organizations, particularly Hizbul Mujahideen and affiliated groups, adopted systematic intimidation as a strategy against Kashmiri Pandits. Pamphlets, posters, and letters circulated publicly, threatening Pandits and demanding that they vacate their homes. This strategy culminated in the ultimatum issued on 14 April 1990, which demanded that Pandits leave the Valley within two days (Pandita 92).

The exodus was largely influenced by psychological forces. Militant propaganda intensified fear through rumors of massacres and communal targeting, producing an atmosphere of uncertainty and existential fear. As Rahul Pandita recounts in Our Moon Has Blood Clots, the exodus was not just marked by urgency and disorientation, as families as families confronted the simultaneous loss of ancestral homes and community bonds (Pandita 92-94). In addition to violence and fear, social marginalization also became an important mechanism of displacement. Militant rhetoric portrayed Pandits as outsiders or collaborators, defining them as incompatible with the changing political and cultural identity which Islamist groups attempted to impose upon the Valley. The exodus also carried a symbolic dimension that deeply affected cultural and religious life. Pandits were not only physically displaced, but also severed from temples, sacred spaces, and ritual practices that had historically anchored community identity.

Material and Cultural Loss: Economic Deprivation and Religious Dislocation

The mass departure of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley in 1990 was not only a humanitarian tragedy but also a serious socio-economic upheaval. Pandit families arrived in cities such as Jammu, Delhi, and other places of refuge with minimal financial resources Majority of them carried only a few personal belongings, leaving behind homes, businesses, orchards, and property accumulated over generations (Kaul 48-49).

Relief camps, rented apartments, and overcrowded lodgings-makeshift settlements of a temporary nature- provided safety to people but were often ill-equipped, lacked privacy, and lacked basic facilities. The loss of economic security resulted in a deep sense of disorientation among the displaced population. The coerced exodus also disrupted cultural and religious practices that had long been woven into community identity for centuries. Temples and sacred spaces functioned not only as sites of worship but also as communal and cultural anchors. Displacement severed access to these spaces, resulting in the erosion of collective rituals and religious continuity. The impact of displacement extended to language and oral traditions. Kashmiri, the Pandits' mother tongue, had historically served as the medium through which folk songs, religious chants, and family narratives were transmitted. Children raised in camps and urban host communities increasingly adopted Hindi, English, or local languages as their primary modes of communication, with Kashmiri largely confined to interactions with elders (Kaul 52). As a consequence, oral traditions and cultural memory faced gradual erosion, particularly among younger generations.

Theoretical Framework: Exile, Trauma, Memory, and the Postcolonial Condition

A critical analysis of the Kashmiri Pandit displacement narratives needs a theoretical examination that engages with the concepts of exile studies, trauma studies, memory studies, as well as postcolonial studies. Edward Said's ground breaking book on exile offers the beginning point. In this book, Reflections on Exile, Said defines exile as a separation as well as an internal disconnection, "a forced split between a human being and a native place" (173). This separation leads to a state that Said refers to as a "contrapuntal consciousness." This refers to the state of simultaneously occupying two mental frameworks, yet not fully identifying with either.

Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial articulation of Said's spatial preoccupation expands into the realm of cultural identity itself. Bhabha's "unhomely" refers to "the state where the distinction between home and world is no longer marked" and where "alienation occurs in the nation-state" itself. "Unhomely" is, according to Bhabha, "the moment when the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (13). Pandits retain the Kashmiri language, ritual practice, and culinary traditions while negotiating urban exile-the resulting liminality defines their postcolonial predicament: Kashmiri by culture, Indian by citizenship, yet denied territorial belonging within India itself.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory explains how violent dislocation ruins linear memory and coherent narrative. According to Caruth, traumatic experience overwhelms the psyche's capacity for immediate understanding, surfacing belatedly through flashbacks, repetitions, and fragmented recollection (4). In Kashmiri Pandits, trauma operates at several registers: the initial violence and forced exodus, protracted existence in relief camps, and knowledge that Kashmir remains proximate yet inaccessible. It is the temporal complexity, therefore, that accounts for why so often non-linear structures underscore Pandit testimonies, returning obsessively to certain images-abandoned homes, desecrated temples, interrupted childhoods. Rahul Pandita's Our Moon Has Blood Clots is exemplary in this way, shuttling between past and present as traumatic memory intrudes upon narrative progression.

Marianne Hirsch's term, "postmemory," explains the way in which the trauma of displacement is carried down through the generations in the Kashmiri Pandit community. Hirsch defines postmemory as 'the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before' (5). Thus, postmemory is not a direct experience but, rather, an experience which is both present and missing for the succeeding generation. This displacement comes to the generation as postmemory, through cultural practice: the preservation of the Kashmiri language in diaspora, the annual commemoration of exodus days, the conservation of food as cultural memory. The memoir by Pandita performs the very act of postmemory - the intention to archive the memory for the generation born into the aftermath of displacement. This pedagogy, however, faces critical questions, about how memory can be maintained in the community and the following generation not imprisoned in the laments of the past. How do the

younger Pandits move between their parents' yearning for Kashmir and their own lives in diaspora? Studied together, these theoretical strands light up the Kashmiri Pandit condition as spatial, temporal, and psychic dislocation: exiled within the nation, bearing trauma that is not assimilated, and transmitting loss across generations while residing in the liminal spaces of postcolonial citizenship.

Literary Testimonies: Memory, Witnessing, and Narrative Resistance

Kashmiri Pandit literary narratives form a crucial body of testimonial literature that challenges official narratives and state-sanctioned erasure. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue, testimonial writing performs "acts of witnessing" that demand recognition. part of contemporary South Asian testimonial literature. The texts such as Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*; T.N. Dhar's *Under the Shadow of Militancy: The Diary of an Unknown Kashmiri*, and Rohit Tikoo's *Uprooted and Forlorn- The Life of a Kashmiri pandit in exile t*hough employ different narrative strategies but share a common purpose: to make visible what has been systematically rendered invisible. Additionally, each of these texts challenges the task of representing the trauma while preserving the specific experience of Kashmiri Pandits displacement in the context of the Kashmir conflict.

Recent scholarship by Joshi and Dave demonstrates how these literary pieces serve as mediators of cultural memory preservation while portraying the psychological and political displacement encountered by the exiled population (2).Rahul Pandita's memoir opens with a critical statement "This is not a story. This is a memory". Disavowing the fiction label, Pandita lays claim to testimonial authority for his account. By documenting particular events-Tika Lal Taploo's murder, the loudspeaker threats, the exodus routes-Pandita constructs an archive for events about which official histories maintain silence. Gigoo's novel proceeds differently, adopting the garden as metaphor for irretrievable loss. Mental journeys back to his ancestral garden preserve topographies lost to all but memory.

T.N. Dhar's diary provides another form of testimonial. While memoir provides a retrospective insight, his dated entries provide insight into displacement as it occurs. His diary registers the erosion of security on a daily basis—new threats, disappearance of neighbourhood members, breakdown of community. this provides exactly what retrospective accounts commonly fail—information about life under threat, which has yet to materialize. Rohit Tikoo's writing is a documentation of such displacements with meticulous detail of individuals affected by it. While officials' records reduce the displaced to numbers, Tikoo restoress Tikoo restores names and particular stories. Each documented case insists that these lives matter, these losses count, this history cannot be dismissed.

These texts also resist the marginalization of the Pandits in the Kashmiri discourse. As Pandita states, "We are the footnote that nobody wants to read" in the story of Kashmir. His memoir resists this marginalization. In the story of the Kashmiri refugees, the protagonist of Gigoo's novel takes on the voices that downplay the suffering of the Pandits to make this important differentiation on suffering as a function of location versus displacement: "But we alone were driven out." These writers are faced with the problem of trying to narrate a trauma that resists representation. Yet to write becomes an act of resistance—against forgetting, against denial, against easy erasure. These narratives bear testimony to the fact that the Pandit losses are an important part of history and that bearing testimony has its moral and political connotations.

Conclusion

The Kashmiri Pandit exodus of 1990 represents a critical juncture in independent India's history, exposing the failure of democratic institutions to safeguard a religious minority from systematic displacement. The study elaborates that the political turmoil in the late 1980s, targeting violence, and militant propaganda together converged to make Kashmir uninhabitable for Pandits. The displacement that resulted was nothing short of a geographical dislocation; it struck at every dimension of community life: economic networks were destroyed, cultural practices uprooted, religious sites abandoned, and psychological bonds with ancestral land were severed.

This paper contributes to existing scholarship by reading Kashmiri Pandit narratives not merely as refugee literature, but as critiques of postcolonial citizenship within the Indian nation-state. For Kashmiri Pandits, the unhomely is not the result of migration across borders but of exclusion within the nation, making India itself a site of estrangement. Utilizing theoretical constructs from Said, Bhabha, Caruth, and Hirsch, this analysis reveals Kashmiri Pandits as occupying an "unhomely" position within the Indian nation-state. Although they possess legal citizenship yet remain excluded from their native land. They hold constitutional rights but are devoid of the safety and belonging that those rights promise. This paradox challenges the very core of Indian secularism, illustrating the discrepancy that still exists between democratic ideals and the lived reality of religious minorities. When the state fails to protect a minority within its own borders, secular citizenship becomes an empty category. The literary works of Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, T. N. Dhar, and Rohit Tikoo are instrumental in this regard as they not only serve as literary testimonies but also achieve significant political work. The accounts in these records show the extent of violence and loss that are generally downplayed or forgotten by official histories. They serve as a communal memory for those born in exile, who, although they will inherit displacement, will not have directly experienced it. Above all, they refuse to be politically marginalized by demanding that the presence of the Pandits be acknowledged in the public debate about Kashmir. By narrating their experiences, these writers turn the victims' silence into the witnesses' voices, thus seizing the power to decide the narration of history from authors who have been disregarded or silenced. An "unhomely" nation is not only a theoretical idea but the actual reality experienced by the Kashmiri Pandits. Their story challenges democracies to answer a fundamental question: does citizenship truly guarantee protection, recognition, and home—or merely legal status? The answer matters not only for understanding the Kashmiri Pandit condition but for confronting the limits of secular democracy when tested by communal violence and displacement.

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