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THE PERSONAL AND THE COLLECTIVE: A STUDY OF THE EXILE OF KASHMIRI PANDITS THROUGH MULTIPLE GENRES

Dr. Javaid Iqbal Bhat [1]

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of English, South Campus, University of Kashmir

ABSTRACT

This paper will probe the meaning of "home" as a subjective category for healing through a comparative examination of selected poems by Lalita Pandit Hogan (1950-) and two documentaries Tell them: 'The Tree they had planted has now Grown' and The Lost Paradise: A documentary on plight of Kashmiri Pandits by Ajay Raina and Akshay Labroo respectively. Both the poems and the documentaries summon the notion of Home as a potential "end", with the latter deliberately invested in the double meaning of loss and purpose. In identifying the "end" of return to home, the two genres fuse the personal with the trans-personal, blend the concrete with the political, mix the haunting memory of past with a confusing present and an uncertain future. The welding of diverse poles in each evokes the tragedy of the unending conflict in modern Kashmir. While the erasure of hope in the "end" of home is strongly present in Lalita Pandit's poems, the documentaries appeal to the political establishment to rend the wall between the despair of present and the free home of the future. For Raina and Labroo, as with Pandit, the present is rife with desolation and fear. However, while documentaries hint at the transience of the Now, Pandit, rooted in the fear of the radical other in the altered political scenario, evokes the permanent migration of the Self from the healing home. Both cautiously present the past as far more adjusting and accommodative than the insularly exclusivist perceptions of the present saturated with the growing cries of liberation from a country with which her Hindu community has deep cultural connections. In all, personal expression transcends the individual limits to acquire a putative representative voice for their respective cultural configurations. Neither is dedicated to a narrow essentialist rendering of those configurations.

Keywords: Exile, Migration, Freedom, Kashmiriyat, Homeland

Corresponding Author

Dr. Javaid Iqbal Bhat, javjnu@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tell them: 'The Tree they had planted has now Grown' is a cinematic diary of a Kashmiri revisiting his home after eleven years to witness the scars of a paradise lost. **The "film-maker's sensitivity and anguish" (Kumar 160) is revealed in the slow verbalisation of moving images.** The Documentary of 58 minutes was made in 2001. It was won critical appreciation for the sensitive representation of the complex situation in Kashmir and many awards including, Second Best Documentary, IDPA Documentary and Animated Films Awards, 2002 Best Documentary, Radio and Advertisers Practitioners Awards, 2002 Golden Conch, Mumbai International Film Festival, 2003. Ajay Raina has also directed *Apour ti Yapour. Na Jang na Aman. Yeti chu Talukpeth* in 2011.

Akshay Labroo's *The Lost Paradise: A documentary on plight of Kashmiri Pandits* is a 14.48 minutes Documentary made from the platform of the ruling political party of India, the Bharatiya Janata Party. It has been made in 2013.The sharp propagandistic overtones in the documentary are too conspicuous.

Lalita Pandit is a Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin -La Crosse where she teaches courses in Shakespeare, Literary Theory, International Studies in Literature, and general writing and communication courses. Her published books include, *Criticism and Lacan: Essays and Dialogue on Language, Structure, and the Unconscious*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan, published by the University of Georgia Press, 1990; *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism, and Culture*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan, State University of New York Press, 1995; *Comparative Poetics: Non-Western Traditions of Literary Theory*, edited with Patrick Colm Hogan, Special Issue of College Literature. 23. I Feb., 1996. Pandit is an associate editor of the journal *College Literature*.

Lalita Pandit's collection of poems *Sukeshi has a Dream and Other poems of Kashmir (1998)* is part of a larger yet to be published collection of poems. Some of the poems in this collection like "My Father's Country", "Azadi: 1989-1995", "The Yellow River," "Father", "Summer Rain", "Sukeshi has a Dream" and "Anantnag" are haunting in their evocation of contemporary Kashmir.

SUMMARY OF THE DOCUMENTARIES AND SELECTED POEMS

Ajay Raina visits Kashmir after eleven years. During these eleven years he has stayed outside, either, presumably in different parts of India or outside the country. His return journey takes him to different parts of Kashmir. The house his parents had built to live in along with their children, to the ancestral house in a village where the caretaker of the house tells Ajay to inform his family that the Pine tree they had grown along the mud wall has grown. He visits another village where a lone Hindu family is surrounded by Muslim households, and the Hindu owner of the house tells him (suspecting him to be a Muslim) that either Hindus have to convert to Islam or Muslims have to convert to Hinduism for the problems his family is facing to end. The Hindu owner hints at the matrimonial issues. To find a groom or bride for the daughter or son is not an easy task because most of the Hindus have migrated away from Kashmir. At another place the filmmaker is caught in what he, borrowing the typically Indian term, a "riot" and he asks a fisherwoman whether she was afraid hearing the gunshots. She replies why should she be afraid, from this cryptic remark Ajay adduces that when death becomes meaningless fear ceases and weapons of war become mere toys in the hands of people (picture of woman with a gun in hand). For Ajay Raina, a manner which reflects an astute naivete, the Indian soldier in Kashmir represents secular India and the militants, Kashmiris as well as non-Kashmiris, Jihadis from across the border. The soldier is locked in a mortal combat with the forces which do not wish secularism to bring Kashmir within her ambit. Ajay visits his friends from school and also the home which his parents had built but left incomplete when armed rebellion began against India

and the Hindu community fled for safety in an environment of fear, suspicion and killings. All along the Documentary there is a brooding ambience about what was and what is and what might happen in the near future. He had set out to find out whether it was possible to break the walls of mistrust and fear, but seems to return with more questions than could be answered, and perhaps leaving the initial question unanswered..

Akshay Labroo's Documentary *The Lost Paradise* is made and publicised from the platform of the right wing Indian National Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party. He believes that the "forcible migration" of Kashmiri Pandits was sponsored by Pakistan and the native population of Kashmir, the Kashmiri Muslims did nothing to stop the "exodus" of Hindus from Kashmir. The narrator reels of figures to underline the suffering of the Kashmir Pandits; figures, which have been seriously disputed by scholar specialising in Kashmir. For example, he says that in 1990 some 0.7 million Hindus fled from Kashmir; a figure which has challenged from many quarters. Many scholars have disputed the exaggerated figure (Rai). The Documentary mentions how Kashmiri pundits were targeted by "terrorists" from across the border beginning with the assassination of Tika Lal Taploo who was a lawyer and member of the BJP's Executive Committee member. His death was followed by the murder of High Court lawyer N. K. Ganjoo, the latter was connected to the hanging of Maqbool Bhat, a Kashmiri nationalist. The narrator opines that the Kashmir will remain a "Lost Paradise" for Hindus until they can go safely back home and Kashmir is cleaned of "terrorists."

Lalita Pandit in her selected poems is mourning the end of an era in Kashmir. She finds that the town where she had grown up changed beyond recognition. Death is haunting Kashmir. Young boys are being picked up and dumped into interrogation centers. She hears echoes of an "undeclared war" and sounds of boots, jeeps and whistles, which the poet claims are "sovereignty's untired death-rattle." Back when Kashmir was peaceful, the streets were wide and it was not unsafe to leave home at night. The clamour for Azadi (freedom) is widespread; however, she wonders what place Kashmiri Pandits have in a "free" Kashmir. She is melancholic and apprehensive about Kashmir and Kashmiri Pandits. Her father's country is not as the poet says is not ancient Troy but a "place of force" where the war bird "rages and rages." The ancient garden of Sher Bagh is "smelling of death" and the chorus of Azadi is resonating in houses and streets. The Poet notices that the place has become unwelcome for her. There are children who are suspicious, and hatred roams free; life is no longer what it was for her and her community. Lalita Pandit's poems are filled with a sense of despair at the loss of a home which no longer qualifies to be one. The Home appears far too removed from the hope of grasp; the paradise seems to have been permanently lost.

2. PAST PERFECT?

Fenced with ivy, the ancient

garden smells of death.

Rose beds are graves, fountains

speak of tear dried faces -

their unaccounted for grief.

(Pandit *Azadi-1989-1995*)

Both Ajay Raina's Documentary and Lalita Pandit's poems present vignettes of poignant interaction during their temporary return into Kashmir. Ajay Raina's meetings with friends and strangers on roads, villages and hotels are shot through with memories of an era when life and experiences were substantively different. When the narrator of the Documentary is caught in the middle of what he terms as a "riot" but is perhaps a violent friction between protestors and the Indian military, a fisherwoman carrying fish on her head in a wickerwork basket passes by in a hurry. With the camera catching her, the narrator asks her whether she was afraid of what was going on, with the smoke and gun shots around her. She replies "why should I be afraid, dear?" The narrator's palpable panic is contrasted with the visible indifference of the fisherwoman; the latter walking away with fish perhaps amused by the question from the unknown narrator, for the fisherwoman feels the unknown person is asking about what is "normal" or routine. The narrative

deduction is branched into two directions; one into the past and the other which the reader can implicitly feel, in the direction of the space where the minority community is spending her time. While reflecting on the meaninglessness of fear and death, the narrative voice reminiscences about a period when things were far different from what the narrator perceives. The motif of a past with a rich cohabitative Rishi culture is shot through in the Documentary laden with nostalgically melancholic tone. At another place Ajay Raina recalls how he used to walk the streets towards his home or go to his College without any feeling of fear or intimidation. During this past the Pandit father did not have to worry about the marriage of his children for there were many families of the community in the village or in the neighbouring villages to marry off the children. During that past the Chrar-i-Sharif shrine was active and thriving, a sign of the Rishi Islam, uniquely different from the much orthodox versions of Islam in India and Pakistan, and people used to throng to the shrine to get their wishes answered. The people may not know who Nund Rishi was (as is the case with the Driver of Ajay Raina and the other boy who are asked about *Alamdar-i*-Kashmir) yet the spirit of his teachings had seeped into the popular mindset, a spirit which allowed for the flowering of a genteel brand of Islam. The Past is not painted as some kind of a pre-AdamFall idyllic period in the garden of Eden. There were rifts over religious structures or discomfort with the open demonstration of religious identity. Two incidents in this case are underlined: A Hindu in the refugee camp in Jammu tells Ajay Raina that one day was coming down from a Hindu shrine with a Tilak on his forehead. As he came to the street below, a Muslim friend saw him and signalled a friendly taunt. He went toward a side street and rubbed off the vermilion mark on his forehead. The same Hindu tells him that in his village back in Kashmir, the Muslims had performed a "tarki mawalaat" over the construction of a temple; which meant that no Muslim could go and work for the construction of the temple. Further, the Indianness attached with a Kashmiri Hindu was a problem. Both Mr. Raina and Mr. Labroo admit that their claim on Indianness became a cause of their departure from Kashmir. So unlike many other narratives, the Documentary refuses to be carried away by accounts of some utopian peace in Kashmir prior to the rise of insurgency against India. However, it admits of a general atmosphere of amity and cooperation among the different denominations.

Lalita Pandit adopts a similar bemoaning tone about an era which has only left distressing traces behind. In her poem "Azadi 1989-1995" the poet walks about the streets of her home town Anantnag and laments the change in the structure of the street. Way back when she was young and enjoyed "My Father's Country" (her other poem) the street next to the famous Sher Bagh garden-cum-spring was wider and "sunnier". The "rows of ugly houses" did not crowd the roads then; a spacier Kashmir allowed space and time for all irrespective of distinctions of creed. No doubt there were policemen and people dreamed of freedom or Azadi as it is fondly adored by people yet the station housing the policemen was not a dangerous frightening place and dreamers of Azadi were Majnu's of yore without the assailant's edge in the gaze of the dreamer. The celebration of a happy and peaceful past of Kashmir is tempered with memories of majoritarian intimidation. As Ajay Raina qualifies his appreciation of pre-militancy Kashmir so does Lalita Pandit; the people belonging to her community were "not entirely free. They did not dare to dream, whisper, or scream." The "life was eternal then" ("Anantnag") when during the beginning of Summer she along with her parents went to the holy spring of Mattan to offer libations to the dead, her dead from the mother's and the father's side. The ethereally painted Kashmir was a place for the poet to take pride in, and she did in the "gathered blue lotuses" amid the benign presence of the family and the community.

The evocation of past in both Raina and Lalita Pandit are glamorised peaceful time-zones partly because of the pangs of separation from the Home. A home with which are associated not just immediate memories of belonging but also ancient intellectual achievements. There is no doubt that there is in each case a projection of certain dream conditions on the canvas of the past. Such glamorisation is undercut with the Documentary towards the end when the narrative voice invokes the ghost of Partition. The ghost of Partition was well and thriving even before the militancy and after the momentous year of 1947. The ordinary life of Hindus and Muslims was impregnated with the thoughts and shadows of the ghost. The doubt and mistrust had only grown as is hinted by the noted writer and Padma Shri awardee Akhtar Mohi-ud-Din in the Documentary. The noted writer tells Mr. Raina that for a long time only Hindus obtained education and hence took charge of administrative powers by virtue of their educational qualifications. With the acquisition of the same by the Muslims, Hindu had to find new ways remaining relevant hence they took to other languages and looked south ward toward India for better avenues of education and economic power.

3. PRESENT CONTINUOUS?

In the Houseboat where the Bollywood film *Mission Kashmir* (2000) was partly shot a young man meets Ajay Raina. The Producer asks the young man, wearing a tradition *pheran*, about fear. He replies that initially he and his friends used to be scared of firings and grenades, however, they have become used to the same and are no more afraid of gun-fights and explosions taking place around them. This conversation can easily be contrasted with the scene where the Producer is in a Sumo driving through the City in the evening. At one spot they hear gunshots in the distance. The driver stops the vehicle. They hear the shots even louder and the Driver is told by a passerby that cross-firing is going on between militants and army. Then another passerby asks them to reverse the vehicle and leave the spot as the situation can get dangerous, and a bullet might find its way toward them. As one of the passengers can be heard to be a little eager to move forward, the Producer a migrant Kashmiri Pandit who is not used to gun shots, asks the Driver to leave the spot.

The Poet arrives from Delhi to Jammu in a train and then in a proleptically "morgue"-like bus from Jammu to Srinagar. The scene of arrival in Srinagar at the Tourist Reception Center is cast in gothic shape. She imagines her own death on the body of a Hindu woman whose dead body was found underneath a Chinar Tree, four kilometres away from the Tourist Reception Center. Since very few of her community members are in Srinagar or in Kashmir her last rites will be performed by her husband; he would light the sacred fire. Her claim of being the "only woman" who can live in Kashmir to enjoy the mid-summer pleasures is washed away by the flood of darkness and hopelessness which engulf her upon arrival.

The Kashmir of Today for the Poet is the shadow figure of her grandfather, Aftab Ram, who was scared of soldiers. His shadow lurks on the blood-splattered walls of Kashmir. The Poet imagines her to be waiting, perhaps for a day when the soldiers and those fighting soldiers will disappear, and he will come alive from the tall, think shadow which he has become, and return his old charitable medicine hands for the poor villagers whome he, as a Hindu, used to serve. In the City of Dread the Poet is appalled at the state of affairs. Though the name of Kashmir is not mentioned, the reader can easily guess about the location. While the elite are busy in their routine lives, the people are caught in the mortal battle between the "slayer" and the "slain." A nearby hill appears like the hump of a camel, underlining the fear of the changed cultural contours of Kashmir where alien influences were suspect in the bygone times; however, now they, in the monochromatic cultural landscape seem to have been accepted.

The Present is complex mix of idea, opinions, and practices in Kashmir, where on the one hand the idea of India as a homeland for the majority is remote, on the other the landscape of love and harmony has been replaced by hate and acrimony. As night descends on the valley, the mind goes into cartwheels of suspicion and speculation, moving into directions where previously it might not have dared. The color of dreams is haunted by the shadows of doubt and fear. The hotel in which the Producer was resting for a few days was a couple of days later used by a suicide squad to attack the Indian military structure. A part of this Present is the "migration" "exile" "exodus" of the Kashmiri Pandits, as Akshay Labroo underscores in his politically charged short documentary. Though his Documentary has strong ideological overtones and is intended to manufacture outrage in the Hindu heart against the atrocities of the "Islamic terrorists" yet there is no doubt that absence of Pandits from their homes is as good a reality as the torturous existence of the majority community under the Indian military might. Look at it from whichever angle one can, the Present is pregnant with anxiety and for many a tinderbox which can explode if not attended in a manner befitting the situation.

4. FUTURE UNCERTAIN?

No doubt there are problematic areas in Ajay Raina's Documentary like when he affirms that the Indian soldier representing secularism is locked in a mortal battle with the Islamic fundamentalist forces. This argument is fraught with pitfalls as either ideologies are not primary motivations which have locked both in what seems to be an endless mutually hurting warfare. The basic point of contention is the guaranteed right to self-determination. That right is beyond either majoritarian Hindu secularism of India or the majoritarian Islamic ideology of Pakistan. The sanctimonious pose adopted

in favour of India will not stand the test of facts. Is it not a fact that in an attempt to tighten the grip over Kashmir successive Indian regimes have eroded Article 370 with, sometimes, through the help of the puppet regimes installed in Jammu and Kashmir? The drums of secularism beaten on behalf of India may sound good for international consumption but the same will not cut with the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

In fact such a partisan tone is undercut by the narrator himself when he argues that the Kashmir problem cannot be resolved unless the ghost of Partition is exorcised. For it is in Partition of the sub-continent that the roots of the modern conflict of Kashmir are lain. Those who are seeing it otherwise are only fatally ignoring an important fact of history. There would have been no modern conflict over Kashmir, with all the mass killings and migrations, if the Partition of the sub-continent had not occurred. With the denial to take on the Partition, both Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir continue to suffer the wounds of history. The Hindu community in "exile" is longing to see a permanent return to home in order to heal the wounds caused by history and the Muslim community is looking forward to a day when the laminated existence of search operations and Identity Cards gives place peace and dignity.

5. CAMERA WITHIN A CAMERA?

An important question which comes to mind is whether the voices recorded by the Camera are credible and trustworthy. The expression of truth is a noteworthy casualty in the public life; generally the people are wary of speaking truth in public life or before the Camera, for fear of repercussions from either the State or the mob or even the separatists. For a long time now the rule of law is only on the pages of books and in the absence of security afforded by the supremacy of rule of law, the people follow common sense in the constant pursuit of the protection of their lives. A very important aspect of the instinct for a safe life is the production of opinion before the camera. There is an awareness of the voice in camera being disseminated both within and outside Kashmir. An implicit understanding pervades that Kashmir since Partition and especially after the violent uprising against India has become a snake pit of agencies most of which are underground. Only the private space is the perfect site for venting out the inmost secrets about life and state. The Documentary also reflects the nature of speaking on Camera and voice recorder; there are a few scenes where the picture of the person speaking is digitally masked to conceal his identity. A police officer speaks about the "vision" of his father who had warned of the dangers of armed uprising against India. Another person speaks in a similar vein and preferred to remain hidden from the public eye. The narrator's voice underlines the "coded" expression in the owner of the Pandit home at his ancestral house. The Owner, as understood by the subjective "I" narrator, and not so well understood by the writer, feels the Pandit conveyed to him how Pandits were "involving" in the process of conversion in the absence of the availability of local Hindu brides. Or did the Pandit say the same more openly outside the eye of the Camera? Similarly, when he speaks of his cousin whose family has not migrated about his life in Kashmir during the peak of militancy, he reels of incident after incident about the parlous state of affairs in Kashmir. All along his face is not seen clearly for fear of potential hazard to his life. Even those who speak in front of the Camera are not so calm and composed. On the road a man pops his head inside the vehicle and, nervously and quite reflexively, invokes the oppression of India against Kashmiris, and speaks of the freedom of Kashmiris. While the Documentary does try to "naturalise" the recording and commenting process through the deft use of sounds, images, lighting and interviews, the process is undermined by the deployment of camera in a militarised zone where fear has seriously twisted the expression of truth in public domain.

6. CONCLUSION

The permanent return of Pandits to Kashmir demands peace and dialogue both between the India and Pakistan as well as the two communities in Kashmir. No matter how irksome and challenging the channels of communication have to be kept open. Meanwhile, the origin and condition of exile being ridden by contradictory feelings, can be healed by archiving. There is perhaps no other way to determine the nature and definition of exile than by the deployment of "pine" metaphor and bypassing the partisan and patronizing self-righteous rhetoric in Labroo's video. Ajay Raina has deftly used the metaphor of a pine tree to illustrate the promise and danger of return to a land where trust has crumbled under the accumulated weight of history. The present ridden by fear and ambiguities threatens to become future if the ghost of past is not properly laid to rest.

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