

## A Study of Transgenerational Trauma with Reference to the Select Exile Narratives of Kashiri Pandit Authors

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### Abstract

The trauma of any unpleasant experience can be more scarring than the incident itself. It can leave a long-lasting and debilitating impact on an individual's psyche. Professor and pioneer of trauma studies, Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* shed special light on this regard. She says that trauma can be repetitive and its memory can be more damaging than the actual incident that had perpetrated the trauma. When trauma is suffered at a collective level by an entire community or a group, it is referred to as collective trauma. And collective trauma can be even more scarring as the entire fabric of the community can be affected by it. In cases of collective trauma, the trauma becomes deeply ingrained within the collective memory of the community. Collective trauma has the potential to pass on from one generation to another through memories and stories. This passing on of trauma from one generation to another through stories and fear prevalent in the pre-existing trauma is known as transgenerational trauma, also known as intergenerational trauma. The exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community also led to transgenerational trauma in their subsequent generations who didn't witness exodus or violence in person but only heard stories from their parents and grandparents.

During their mass exodus, the whole community suffered collective trauma due to violence (both sexual and nonsexual) and their eventual exile from their homeland. And after three decades of their exile, the trauma continues to dwell in the minds of future generations of the community who, despite having never experienced the traumatic exodus on their own, live it through their ancestors. And the ignorance of their plight by the entire nation and unresolved justice has only deepened their scars further. While the entire community still awaits justice, some of them have found refuge in expressing their pain and trauma through writing. Their writings not only narrate the untold story of their genocide but are also critical texts to preserve their rich heritage and history. These texts also narrate how exile has reshaped their values at a collective level. This paper aims to examine these texts to find references to the expression of transgenerational trauma in the exile narratives written by the Kashmiri Pandit authors.

**Keywords:** *Transgenerational Trauma, Exilic Writing, Kashmiri Pandit Writings, Collective Trauma, Exile Narratives.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is not just the love, memories, and values that one generation passes on to the subsequent

generations. Trauma can also be passed on from generation to generation making it a legacy as well. Sometimes the ancestors leave

behind fears, pain, and traumas as well, through their stories and memories to future generations. And these fears persist for generations due to the transfer of trauma.

Though scientists are still exploring the scope of intergenerational trauma and the passing on of one's traumatic experiences to the next generation, literature establishes its occurrence in many of its texts. One of the most significant texts depicting trauma is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The novel portrays the intergenerational or transgenerational trauma of slavery as a cultural legacy. A community exposed to racism continuously for a prolonged period can suffer from trauma and pass on it to subsequent generations. Similarly, incidents like war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and religious persecution can also lead to the traumatization of an entire race or community at a mass level that can be transferred to their children and their grandchildren in the form of collective memory.

The forced exodus and exiling living of the Kashmiri Pandits have also inflicted collective trauma upon the entire community. Their future generation who had not experienced genocide, developed shared experiences of violence, including rape, molestation, and harassment; homelessness; and exilic living. The three decades of exilic living have plunged them into a state of prolonged mental trauma that keeps on transferring to future generations.

#### Transgenerational or Intergenerational Trauma: Definition and Meaning

It was in 1966 that the term "transgenerational trauma" first appeared in an article by the Canadian psychiatrist Vivian M. Rakoff et al. In this article, Rakoff et al. documented the transmission of trauma from parents to children (Rakoff, Sigal & Epstein, *Canada's Mental Health*, Vol. 14, 1966). This article laid the

groundwork for further research on transgenerational or intergenerational trauma.

In simple words, "transgenerational trauma" means the transmission of parental trauma to children and sometimes even grandchildren. This transmission of trauma can further affect their behaviour and thought processes. Guyton et al. (2021, 13) further simplify the definition of transgenerational trauma, as "when heart wounds are passed on from one generation to another within families and across communities." According to numerous studies, though the trauma may or may not do genetic alterations in the next generation, it may exhibit itself through the children's behaviour, thinking patterns, and emotional expressions.

Numerous studies and even literary texts show that transgenerational trauma does exist. For example, trauma and fear are evident in the children of Holocaust survivors, and also in African Americans who have not even had first-hand experience of violence and discrimination. One of the most popular examples of the transgenerational trauma is that of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. They have a tendency to not stock up their fridges in continuation to their ancestors practice of doing so as the inmates of the camps were not allowed to stock their fridges with food. Because if they were found doing this, it would result in their prompt execution. And since then, the act of not storing food in fridges became a family practice and tradition in subsequent generations of the community.

However, one community that was wiped out from academic, political and media discourse of India and the world was the Kashmiri Pandit community. They were threatened to leave their women behind in Kashmir and the men to leave the valley. They were left with only three

options: convert to Islam, leave the valley or be killed (merge, leave or perish).

#### Transgenerational Trauma in the Subsequent Generations of Exiled Kashmiri Pandits

The victims of exodus, genocide and war crimes continue to relive their trauma from time to time through their memories. Due to persistent recalling of their memories, they make trauma a living experience also for their children who never experienced it first-hand. As Cathy Caruth says, “[T]rauma is repetitive, against the very will of the survivor and it is transgenerational in nature” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 02). No survivor would ever like to continue living in trauma. However, it stays and repeats in the victims’ subconscious mind. It is through their narratives and memories that trauma survivors pass on this fear of vulnerability to their future generations.

The Kashmiri Pandit community is not an exception when it comes to the association between their history and trauma. Their mass exodus happened at 1989 due to militant insurgency. The incidents of violence, namely, killings, rape and harassment, are still afresh in their collective memory. And their reluctance and refrain from returning to their homeland even after more than thirty years of exilic living is the evidence of the existence of fear and the transgenerational trauma in the current generation.

It's the authors of these exile narratives from the current generation who are voicing their ancestors’ plight, which was otherwise ignored by the entire nation and the world collectively for a long period.

Kashmiri Pandit author Siddhartha Gigoo – in his essay, “Once We Had Everything”, has drawn parallels between the condition of

Kashmiri Pandits with that of the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. He further writes in the essay published in an anthology of the same name and coedited by Arvind Gigoo and Adarsh Ajit – that the atrocities inflicted upon the Pandit community have been collectively ignored by the entire intellectual fraternity including the media, academicians, politicians and intellectuals.

Alienation had led to mental diseases and the psychological trauma in the migrant population, as he writes in his collection of short stories, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*:

They struggled with the daily monotony of life, battling a sense of vacuum and despair, eventually growing old far too quickly, not realizing that age had invaded them and made them fragile and sick, until they couldn’t bear any more. They fell apart, both mentally and physically. (Gigoo, 184)

In his short story *Danseuse of the River* published in his short story collection, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, the anonymous narrator says:

“For us, living is not about finding contentment. It is about keeping ourselves from falling silent and becoming insane.” (Gigoo, 182)

In lines, it is implied that the protagonist wants to convey that their major struggle for while living in exile was against depression, mental illness and trauma. Though unwilling, the community passed on their trauma to subsequent generations.

#### Corelation Between Transgenerational Trauma and Identity

Identity plays a very crucial role in transgenerational trauma. Whether a section of

a community is a victim or survivor of hate crime, genocide or religious persecution, identity plays a significant part, because it is the identity of the community that is targeted. So, in all forms of genocide that has happened in the history, identity has played an important role. Whether it was the genocide of Jews and Sri Lankan Tamils, the racism African Americans had to suffer, or the ethnic cleansing of the Kashmiri Pandits, it was due to their identity that they were attacked.

Identity passes on from one generation to another in a community. And if the community has a traumatic past that is related to their identity, then the sense of vulnerability due to their identity also extends across generations. Numerous studies and literary texts substantiate this fact. And the Kashmiri Pandits' community is no different in this regard, as they were targeted due to their religious identity and killings of people from the community still happen in the valley. And this was the reason that while they were still in the valley many of them tried disguising their appearance to avoid putting themselves in danger. For example, the women avoided wearing vermillion on their forehead and many men kept long beards to disguise their Hindu community.

Prithvi Nath Kabu – in his personal essay, “Seasons of Longing”, published in the anthology, *A Long Dream of Home* – writes about the brutal murder of his son by militants. His son who was a lecturer in Gool Arnas, chose to stay in Kashmir even after the situations became tense in the valley in 1989, and even though Prithvi Nath and his wife decided to leave. Prithvi Nath says that his son's only crime was his religious identity, which led to his merciless death. He writes:

“My son's face was not recognisable. There were wounds on his body. He seemed to have fought with his killers. . . . My son was a lecturer. He was killed because he was a Pandit and a teacher.” (Kabu, Gigoo & Sharma, 243)

On one hand, it was due to their identity that Kashmiri Pandits were targeted and attacked, and on the other it was their identity which suffered an eventual loss due to their exodus. ‘Kashmir’ was an integral part of Kashmiri Pandits' identity and with the loss of land, they lost a crucial aspect of their identity. Minakshi Watts – in her narrative, “The Day I Became a Tourist in My Own Home”, published in the anthology *A Long Dream of Home* – narrates the trauma of having seen the lives of her parents and grandparents change due to their exile. Regarding living the trauma of her grandparents, she writes:

“What pains me the most is how it changed the lives of my elders – my parents and grandparents.” (Watts & Gigoo, 284)

The trauma of longing for the land to which the Pandits once belonged was even more severe than losing the land itself. Minakshi writes further:

“Everything was taken away from us. Even our claim of belonging to Kashmir.” (Watts & Gigoo, 285)

Minakshi further describes that what pains her the most is her inability to show her children their mother's place of birth.

Belonging to a land, community or race is one's basic right as Simone Weil writes in her essay, *Uprootedness*, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define.” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 40) The denial of that basic human right has only multiplied their pain and trauma.

## Writing as a Means to Heal Transgenerational Trauma

Though the heartache of their traumatic past continues to remain with them through their memories and narratives, whether writing has in any way helped Kashmiri Pandits cope with the pain is the pressing question. Does telling their stories, which was once completely neglected, give any solace to these writers? Or do they consider it their responsibility to inform the world about what befell them? There is a new and emerging army of Kashmiri Pandit writers who are writing for numerous reasons, one of which is that they find it cathartic.

Two of the most prominent Kashmiri Pandit writers, Rahul Pandita and Siddhartha Gigoo, write with very clear intentions. For Rahul Pandita, who is also a journalist, writing about his community's plight is more about a cause. He writes in his memoir, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*:

"It has become unfashionable to speak about us or raise the issue of our exodus. But I have made it my mission to talk about the 'other story' of Kashmir." (Pandita, 220)

On the other hand, his fellow writer Siddhartha Gigoo's purpose in writing about his and his elders' traumatic past is catharsis. He writes, "Kashmir is a home I can no longer reclaim except through my writings." (Scroll, 2022)

Gigoo's also claims his writing writing as activism – a nonviolent form of rebellion to reclaim his lost land and to give voice his community. In his exile narrative, "Once We Had Everything", Gigoo expresses his disappointment towards the stakeholders who failed his community and his motive behind writing about their exile. He questions the successive state and central governments who

have failed and betrayed the entire community and ignored their plight for a long time. (Gigoo, 24) he writes,

"We will rise and rebel against those who are hell-bent on preventing our homecoming. But our rebellion will be through our writings and activism, not violence and propaganda." (Gigoo, 24)

For both of them, writing about their trauma was like reliving it, but it was also healing at the same time – a process of reflecting on what they had lost and what they needed to let go to lead their lives peacefully. However, continuing their struggle to return to their lost home is an issue both writers have raised persistently in many places in their writings. Likewise, there are many other Kashmiri Pandit writers, even those who weren't eyewitnesses to the genocide, who have expressed trauma and transgenerational trauma in their writings.

Nikhil Koul, who was just three-and-a-half years old at the time of genocide, doesn't remember what happened to him or his family at that time. Even though he never witnessed the violent events through his eyes, his longing for his lost home is something he has inherited from his parents. He writes in his personal narrative, "An Imaginary Identity", published in the anthology *A Long Dream of Home*, coedited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma, that he was just three-and-a-half years when the exodus happened. Though his doesn't remember any of his own experiences of exodus, for twenty-five years his exile was an incessant struggle to preserve the memory of his homeland that he had gathered through his parents and grandparents. (Koul, "An Imaginary Identity", 276)

For survivors like Koul, even preserving the memory of whatever meagre remembrance he

has of his homeland and house is traumatic. Koul's association with Kashmir is only through his elders' memories and stories. He further writes,

"I discover and see Kashmir in the narratives of my elders. Kashmir exists in the memory of the young people of my generation. This memory is borrowed from our elders." (Koul, "An Imaginary Identity", 279)

It is obvious that their recollections about the loss and trauma would have become an integral part of their conversations and manifested in many different ways, thus enabling the transmission of trauma to subsequent generations.

Rahul Pandita narrates another incident of transgenerational trauma in his memoir. He writes about his friend's daughter who is attending first day of her school. On being asked to express a few lines about her home, she replies that she had no home and that her family had a house but that it had been burnt down. On this, when the parents were called and informed about this incident, the apologises and later later made sure to tell their daughter that the flat they now lived in was indeed their home. (Pandita, 210)

Another important work that addresses transgenerational trauma in Kashmiri Pandits' community is the work by the Psychologist Rajat Mitra, *The Infidel Next Door*. The book narrates how ironical it was that the very own natives of the land were called infidels by extremist forces due to their religious identity. In an interview published on "My India My Glory", he talks about the Hindu denial, and about how the entire community suffered in silence and continue to do so. In another interview given to Patriot, Mitra says:

"Silence is one of the potent vehicles of transgenerational trauma. . . . Silence doesn't heal the wounds of past, it only perpetuates it." (Mitra, 2019)

Mitra further says that his book was an attempt to give some closure, some healing to the Pandit community and to make sure that the world doesn't forget their story.

Varad Sharma – in his narrative, "The Inheritance of Memory", published in the anthology *A Long Dream of Home* – writes that he was a new born when the genocide of the Kashmiri Pandits transpired. Even he tried many times, he could never return to Kashmir since then due to the apprehension of his parents. So, he says that Kashmiri is his muse now. (Sharma & Gigoo, 253)

Gigoo adds another dimension to their loss in his novel, *The Garden of Solitude*. He says that, how the genocide of the Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus was not only a loss for the Pandit community but their Muslim friends as well. Many Muslims were also killed for supporting their Hindu neighbours and friends. He shows how both communities suffered unfathomable losses. As Judith Herman substantiates in her work, *Trauma and Recovery*, that it's not just the victim but also the perpetrator who suffers from trauma while inflicting trauma on their victims, also known as insidious trauma (1992). So, while the exiled Pandits lost their homes, homeland, ancestors, culture and heritage, their Muslim friends who stayed back also had to lose their sons, neighbours, future and peace. Ironically, as a result of militancy and insurgency, prevalent for so many years, both communities suffered casualties in their own ways.

Not only Kashmiri Pandits but the entire valley now lives in a constant shadow of violence and trauma due to the ongoing conflict that majorly

erupted in 1989. According to a 2016 Al Jazeera report, approximately 1.8 million Kashmiri adults were suffering from some form of mental distress at the time. Speaking to the Al Jazeera, psychiatrist Mushtaq Margoob says, "Before 1989, there were no PTSD cases, but now we have an epidemic of disorders in Kashmir. Generation after generation has been at the receiving end; anybody could get killed or humiliated – it's a condition of helplessness. So, it is transgenerational transmission of trauma." It will not be wrong to say that the continuing conflict, violence and militancy over many decades, has pushed the entire population into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## CONCLUSION

What makes their plight even more harrowing is the denial of their pain by a section of intellectuals. While the trauma and transgenerational trauma in the survivors of other exiled communities have been reported and researched extensively, the same is much under-explored in the context of the Kashmiri Pandits and Hindus. Their transgenerational trauma, is a hidden reality of their present generation. Though the community stands at the brink of extinction, their hope of return to their homeland still remains uncertain.

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