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Gender, Memory, and Displacement: Exploring the Impact of Exile on Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit Women

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Abstract

The paper examines the interconnecting themes of gender, memory, and displacement through the shared experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit women in the diaspora. It investigates the ways in which the forced exiles have shaped the lives of the women and shaped their memories of suffering and survival outside their homeland through the lens of literature.

Both the communities, especially the women have suffered substantial trauma due to longstanding conflicts in their region; the Sri Lankan women during the Civil War that lasted almost three decades from 1987-2009, and the Kashmiri pandit women during the insurgency that peaked from 1989 onwards. The paper explores the psychological, cultural, and social impact of this trauma on their lives and how it has fractured their sense of identity and culture and made them redefine their roles within the community.

By following a multidimensional approach of literary analysis, and gender studies the paper assesses how memory has played a crucial role in the lives of these women. It studies how the shared experiences of the women have led to the creation of a collective memory of the trauma they endured and the significant changes and culture shock they later experienced. It also studies how these women have had to rebuild new identities while dealing with the trauma and cultural changes in the new lands. For Tamil women, the memories of trauma and survival are also interconnected with the show of resilience and courage in the face of adversity. In the case of Kashmiri Pandit women, memory is used as a tool for preserving their cultural heritage while being forced to live a life of exile within their own country. Their narratives grapple with a sense of alienation while trying to acclimatise in spaces outside their home.

Key words: Exile, Sri Lankan Tamil women, Kashmiri Pandit women, memory, forced displacement, trauma, and identity.

Migrations, both forced and voluntary, have been an “inevitable part of social processes across the world”. (Dhar, 5) One of the earliest known examples of exile is the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE, wherein the themes of loss, hope, and the desire for return are prevalent in the litera-

ture of that period, influencing Jewish thought and spirituality for centuries. These themes are reverberated in the literature of exile even now. They represent not just the mere act of physical migration from one's homeland but also the deep psychological, cultural, and social consequences of being uprooted from one's home.

Exile refers to the state of being forced to live outside one's home country due to political, ethnic, or religious reasons according to the Cambridge Dictionary. Displacement on the other hand encapsulates the broader phenomenon and experience of leaving one's home temporarily or permanently due to conflict of any kind. Both concepts have central common issues like loss of security, identity, sense of belonging, and the struggle to fit into the new alien world of the host country and adapt to the new cultural norms, language, and even geographical factors like the climate.

For the displaced people the shared experiences are shaped by the pain of separation from their family, language, culture, and history causing them to exist in a limbo between their past and present lives. The trauma of being uprooted from their home and trying to find a sense of belonging in a new foreign land marks some of the key concerns of literature from the diaspora. The ideas of home, identity, nostalgia, alienation, and longing for a sense of belonging remain intrinsic to the literature of exile. The experiences of exile and displacement are embodied in the context of Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit communities, both of whom faced large-scale displacement due to ethnic and political violence in their home states. Sri Lanka like Kashmir, since gaining independence from British rule has been the site of internal strife. In Kashmir, it was the right to self-determination and in Sri Lanka, it was the power struggle between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities with the latter demanding a separate nation-state, *Eelam*, comprising of areas in the northern and eastern part of the island nation. Both the areas suffered decades-long conflict between the state and the insurgents leading to large-scale displacement both internally and exter-

nally. Both areas also faced disruption of daily lives and access to education, healthcare, and employment. The most vulnerable groups that fell prey to the adversities in these conflict zones were the women and children. Harrowing tales of wartime atrocities and trauma have been encapsulated in the novels coming from the regions. The selected novels for the analysis comprise narratives with a focus on women and the consequences of the violent conflict on their lives. How their lives were disrupted and, in some cases, displaced due to the conflict.

For both Sri Lankan Tamils and Kashmiri Pandits, displacement has not only resulted in a physical uprooting from their homelands but has also imposed a psychological burden characterized by trauma and loss. The experiences of these communities highlight how displacement is not a uniform experience; rather, it is deeply influenced by gender roles and societal expectations.

In *A Long Dream of Home*, there is a section of stories, *Summers of Exile*, based on the Kashmiri Pandit's experience in the migrant camps of Jammu and Udhampur after they were displaced from their homeland-Kashmir. The pandits who were displaced were accommodated in temples and government schools near Jammu and Udhampur. The ones who were able to afford rent moved on to rented accommodations in the city and the majority were later shifted to single-room tenements in government-allocated camps in outskirts like *Mutthi*, *Purkhu*, etc. Sushant Dhar in *Life in the Camp* describes the conditions in the camp as:

“My parents withered in the endless summers, in inadequate spaces and stifling heat...the scorching heat was unbearable; many succumbed to sunstrokes and snake bites. Deaths became a daily affair in the camps. Migrants lived through this tumultuous journey, battling desolation, toiling day after day.” (Dhar, 77)

The camps became sites of a range of hardships like water scarcity, unclean and clogged toilets, constant stench, lack of privacy due to congested living quarters, lack of economic opportunities, and general apathy. The fami-

lies who had lost their jobs or agricultural incomes became dependent on paltry government allowances for sustenance. The children's education was disrupted until the government agreed to establish camp schools and colleges which lacked good infrastructure. B.L Zutshi points out,

“Because of the political upheaval, social unrest, turmoil, and militancy in Kashmir, it took the students five years to complete the three-year degree courses.”

From the beautiful and scenic environs of the Kashmir Valley where they had huge houses of their own, the migrants got cramped tenements and had to deal with the harsh climate of the plains. The women in particular had an additional set of issues that resulted from lack of proper hygiene in the shared public toilets to constant flooding of the camps due to rain-water. The harsh summers of the plains made them susceptible to health issues like strokes and skin infections. They also suffered from mental health issues like depression and anxiety due to the constant reminders of the abnormality of their living quarters and a constant longing for their homes. This longing was kept alive through the memories of their past and the perpetual nostalgia.

In the initial years, summers caused many deaths due to a lack of acclimatization. There was also a lack of adequate medical facilities in the camps. This general apathy as they grappled with a sense of homelessness created a feeling of isolation and alienation among the migrants living in camps as expressed by Dhar in *A Long Dream of Home*;

“Everyone ignored us as if we didn’t exist... we became a burden for everyone. Our exodus should have stirred the conscience of the government, both state and center but it didn’t.” (Dhar, 78)

In the novels by Tamil authors like *The Seasons of Trouble* by Rohini Mohan and *The Orders Were to Rape You* by Meena Kandasamy, displacement occurred as a result of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) fight for an independent Tamil Eelam state. The violence and repression during the civil war led to large numbers of Tamil

civilians fleeing the island. This displacement was compounded by the war’s brutality, which forced many Tamils to seek refuge in countries like India, Canada, the UK, and Australia. The most vulnerable groups that fell prey to the adversities in these conflict zones were the women and children. Harrowing tales of wartime atrocities and trauma have been encapsulated in the literature coming from the regions. Mugil’s struggle in *The Seasons of Trouble* to escape from the armed forces and locate and take her family to the safer northern parts of the island in an attempt to flee the country is a disturbing and traumatic journey that ends in her being taken to the refugee camps set up by the government post-war for the rehabilitation of the civilians before release. However, the camps became a site of gross human rights violations. The camps where many sought refuge became gendered spaces that exacerbated vulnerabilities, leading to issues such as sexual violence, economic dependency, and limited access to resources. In *The Orders Were to Rape You*, Kandasamy quotes:

“In 2010 less than a year after the war had ended, news reports appeared in the Tamil media of the untold horrors of rape and violence in the Manik Farm Camps. ... Conditions were so bad in these camps that 1400 Tamils were dying there every week.” (Kandasamy, 33)

Kandasamy’s interactions with an ex-Tamil Tigeress and a Tamil Tiger’s wife gave her a deeper insight into the ordeals the women faced due to the war and how the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender made it even worse for them, whether they actively participated or through association, like in case of the Tamil Tiger’s wife, the women became vulnerable to exploitation. She sums it up in the following lines:

“These women’s vulnerability -as women, as poor, as people without papers, as strangers in a new land- makes them easy prey to sexual harassment, rumors, and ostracization.” (Kandasamy, 33,39)

The harrowing tales of exploitation that continued in foreign lands like Indonesia in the

case of the ex-Tamil Tigress re-confirmed the vulnerability of women living in exile in foreign lands. Whether it was for financial gain or to gain sexual favors the women became victims due to their complex realities shaped by patriarchal structures both within their communities and in refugee contexts.

Gender and Exile

Gender plays a complex role in the experiences of individuals living in exile. It shapes their identities, opportunities, and the challenges they face in innumerable ways. Women face marginalization in various forms and are transformed due to their gendered experiences in the host societies. The intersectionality of ethnicity, class, gender, etc further complicates and compounds these interactions. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality in her paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, (Crenshaw, 1989) defines it as:

“The framework for understanding how multiple forms of social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and others, intersect and interact to shape the experiences of individuals, particularly those who face overlapping forms of oppression or discrimination.”

Like in the case of diasporic women, their ethnicity and gender both are causes for their marginalization. Their displacement is marked by a struggle for identity amidst the trauma of war and loss. The selected texts suggest that while displacement affects all members of the community, women have to bear a disproportionate load due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms of the society. They have to continue playing the role of caregivers within their families while grappling with the challenges of living in exile themselves. Women have to carry the burden of following the traditions and rituals particular to their culture even in foreign lands as they are considered as the carriers of culture in traditional families while dealing with discrimination or other such challenges due to living in the diaspora. They are considered as the preservers of cultural identity and native language as well. These additional burdens make their survival in the new environment complex.

The selected texts suggest that while displacement affects an entire community, women bear the extra burden due to the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms of society. The challenges they face are intensified due to their roles as caretakers within families. This is further fragmented by their experiences in exile. This dual role often results in heightened stress and trauma as they attempt to maintain familial stability while dealing with their displacement. Despite the multi-layered roles borne by women in the diaspora, there is a shortage of literature from the woman's perspective that gives a nuanced and authentic understanding of these complexities in the context of Kashmiri Pandit women. According to Ashani Dhar, “most of the literature is androcentric and this further marginalizes them within their community”. (Dhar, 52)

Memory and Identity

Memory plays a crucial role in understanding how women in the diaspora reconstruct their identities. For many, memories of home are entwined with both a sense of loss and a longing for home, Sushant Dhar in *Summers of Exile* encapsulates this feeling in the following lines:

The moment of longing creeps into their hearts and sends ripples of pain, the pain of past memories...my grandmother observes that she might not return to her ancestral place, the land of her birth in her lifetime, so she finds home by recounting memories. Memories, language, and our culture are the only strings of hope that keep us alive in an alien destination. (Dhar, 87)

Despite the sense of loss and betrayal felt by the Kashmiri pandits in the diaspora, the desire to return home to their familiar lanes and hearth is still a hope they keep intact in their hearts, especially the older generations. The younger generations who were born in exile have tried to assimilate into the new cultures and are not necessarily as attached to their roots as the elders. This has been substantiated by Siddhartha Gigoo in the *Season of Ashes* as:

In the context of the lives of an exiled family,

I came across an unsettling ambivalence. The old nursed a yearning to return to their homeland; the middle-aged and the young vacillated between a strange past (which once was beautiful, then changed for the worse) and an uncertain present; the children born in exile grapple to assimilate into the new and carve a new identity, yet grew up amid a shared and fragmented memory, that of their parents and grandparents. (Gigoo, 120)

The act of remembrance becomes a way of preserving their past. However, in the context of the Sri Lankan Tamil women, it is also an act of resilience and creating a collective memory of the past that consists of their shared sufferings. It is a way of reclaiming their narratives and voices. A poem by Aatilatchumi, *Memories Spreading out in the Shade* signifies how old memories are a testament to an unmarred childhood and also their losses as an adult. The literature coming from the war-torn parts of Sri Lanka, mostly in the form of testimonies is a part of the wider corpus of testimonial literature. The main themes of testimonial literature are identity, trauma, and resilience and they are reflected in the works of the selected Sri Lankan authors as well. The literature gives voice to the underrepresented and marginalized Sri Lankan Tamil and even Kashmiri Pandit women living in exile and the trauma and injustices they've experienced over time. Hence, testimonial literature serves as a vital instrument in bringing forth the experience of marginalized communities or individuals and bringing forth their experiences and issues to wider audiences. The raw emotion and immediacy of their traumatic lived experiences make them even more authentic. Testimonial literature also in a way challenges the dominant discourse by providing varied and diverse narratives of the lived experiences and in the process changing public perspective.

Conclusion

The study of Gender, Memory, and Displacement in literature based on Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit women gives critical insights into the intricacies of exile. It highlights how gendered experiences are shaped by indi-

vidual lives and collective narratives in the displaced communities. It showcases how the two communities despite the differences in the manner and reason for their displacement have certain shared experiences as women. It displays how the nature of testimonial literature is an effective tool for bringing forth narratives of diverse marginalized communities and challenging the dominant narratives.

The study of the intersectionality of gender with memory and displacement exposes how women's experiences are often marginalized within broader narratives of conflict due to the androcentric approach of the mainstream narratives. This causes a homogenizing of the experiences of both Sri Lankan Tamil and Kashmiri Pandit women within their communities. This gap underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how gender shapes individual memories and collective identities in the context of exile.

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