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## “Refugee in My Own Country”: Exile, Hospitality and Ethics in the Writings of Kashmiri Pandits

Sritama Chatterjee

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Partha Chatterjee in his essay “Histories and Nations” argues:

...if there were many such alternative histories for the different regions of India, then the centre of Indian history would not need to remain confined to Aryavarta or, more specifically, to the throne of Delhi. Indeed, the very centrality of Indian history would become largely uncertain. The question would no longer be one of “national” and “regional” histories: the very relation between the parts and the whole would be open for negotiation. If there is any unity in these alternative histories, it is not national but confederal. (115)

The fascination with a national history has dominated our imagination for a long time. The aptness of Chatterjee’s argument brings into focus histories of regions that have remained largely ignored and not received much scholarly attention. My intention in this essay is not to uncover the history of such a confederation or province, rather this essay seeks to examine the little explored fictional and non-fictional narratives of Kashmiri Pandits, a Hindu ethnic community who left the valley of Kashmir, following the armed call for independence by Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) from India that resulted in wide-spread conflict and violence in the valley as an attempt to understand how the nation (if any) is conceptualized from a prism that is already fragmented by exile and trauma. While the JKLF allegedly targeted the informers of the state, especially civil servants and police officers, the Pandits were not spared and some of them suffered inconsolable violence. However Sumantra Bose observes “... Rashtriya Swamy Sevak publications [which] claim that large numbers of Hindu shrines were destroyed and Pandits murdered are largely false, to the extent that many of the shrines remain untouched and many of the casualties remain unsubstantiated”. (quoted in Evans 26) Perhaps what resulted in a wide-spread exodus was a paranoia and state of unease, especially after the murders of Tika Lal Taploo, a Hindu Politician and after Nil Kanth Ganjoo, a High Court Judge who had sentenced Maqbool Butt, widely known for his activism and solidarity for the independence of Kashmir. In such a situation, the Kashmiri Pandits who had mainly taken up the ancestral profession of performing worship had no other option but to leave Kashmir and move into the migrant camps set up by the state government in Jammu or to the houses of relatives scattered mainly in Delhi and Agra. At the camps, they face an alienation and an insurmountable grief they have not been exposed to so far. The questions which I would like to pose include: How is the nation written into being through exile? What is the role of memory and trauma in mediating such an experience? How does ethics prefigure in conceptualizing our relationship towards others while in exile? I would specifically focus on a collection of writings anthologized in the book *From Home to House: Writings of Kashmiri Pandits in Exile* to investigate the questions proposed.

## Exile and Vulnerability

The notion of exile has received wide critical attention not only because of its Biblical origins but also because of the fact that the increasing conflict due to religious fundamentalism and dictatorial regimes across Middle East, Africa and South Asia has resulted in a large scale exodus of people, as a necessary tool of survival against oppression. However I would argue that exile is neither an escapade that one chooses voluntarily for oneself nor is it a privileged space that allows one to have an objective view of things, rather as Edward Said argues in his essay "Reflections on Exile", exile is a "discontinuous state of being"(140) which is always in need for reconstitution. To ascribe exile as a category to symbolize general condition of humanity runs the risk of dehistoricisation and takes away its ontological statelessness. Said explicates in the same essay:

On the twentieth century scale., exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and predicament most people rarely experience at first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as "good for us". (138)

Therefore exile is not a strategic instrument but can be best understood as a force often thrust upon oneself that one grapples with but also provides the necessary means of sustenance. What I am trying to propose is that the space of exile while being decentred can also be turned into a powerful form of protest which may or may not be emancipatory but where the performance of those exiled can be registered at the linguistic and cognitive levels. The question that we need to engage with at this juncture is whether the state of spirituality and solitude often vested upon the condition of exile is a positive affective dimension or defence mechanism beyond which lies hidden a kind of vulnerability that we do not recognize. Here, it is important to engage in some discussion of whom we would designate as an exile and how different it is from the category of refugees. Let me take into consideration the definition proposed by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) about refugees and internally displaced persons.

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. (web)

An internally displaced person (IDP) is a person who has been forced to flee his or her home for the same reason as a refugee, but remains in his or her own country and has not crossed an international border. Unlike refugees, IDPs are not protected by international law or eligible to receive many types of aid. (web)

Therefore the term "refugee" and "internally displaced person" are indeed functional categories that have entered into the lexicon of contemporary political discourses while exile is more of a material and existential principle that encompasses both the

categories mentioned above. I would try to investigate how reimagination of “exile” itself can extend the contours of what constitutes political and how it is manifested in the writings of Kashmiri Pandits.

In a non-fictional prose piece titled, “Writing Exile in My Imagination” Ajay Raina who is a film-maker originally from Kashmir articulates how the films that he had made so far almost always contained traces of memory that come to haunt him from time to time. For instance, his film *Memoir* is about the last man to survive on this earth that uses a unique narrative technique of “circularity, repetitions and dream-like, opaque non-story”(126) while his documentary feature *My Crescent Moon* captures the plight of an old woman in search of his son who ultimately dies waiting for his son. What is common to both the narratives is an absence of closure and a lack of coherence that seems to encapsulate his state where “exile means the end of everything”.(127) However the paradox embedded in such a situation is how film-making which was an intimate act for him has been transformed into an act of regenerative potential that allows him to examine the ethical limits of his situation while not discounting the material aspects. Does the fact that he is no longer a resident of Kashmir and do not have to endure the trials and tribulations on a daily basis allow him greater scope of experimentation? Is the condition of exile directly proportional to one’s increasing sense of aesthetics and imagination? Raina mentions how his first encounter with exile was when he was at “home” but did not have a “home” where he could go and instead interrogated by his neighbour about what brought him there. The tone of hostility is a reminder about provisionality of homes that the author had aimed at traversing through his art and imagination but when faced with the experiential dimensions of having actually stayed at such a home (in this case, the experience of the neighbour), he has to confront his own sense of pre-determined ideas that are often illusory and deceptive to the point that it makes one forget the corporeality of the situation. It would be pertinent at this point to invoke Adorno and also reflect on what Said has to say about it. Said writes:

...Ruthlessly opposed to what he called the “administered world”, Adorno saw all life as pressed into ready-made forms, pre-fabricated “homes. [His] reflections are informed by the belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing. Elsewhere, “the house is past [and] it is a part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”

To follow Adorno is to stand away from “home” in order to look at it with the exile’s sense of detachment. For there is considerable merit in the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they produce. We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. (147)

In an incident recollected by Raina, he mentions how a Kashmiri film-maker after the screening of one of his films came up to him and accused him of being one-sided and completely omitting the version of the army. What is at contention here is how language, visual or written creates multiple narratives and how lack of access to each of these versions results in the formation of an anathema which is then relegated into the sphere of dogma and orthodoxy. However it is noteworthy that Raina in a wonderfully self-reflexive paragraphs introspects how “...it was easier to live in Kashmir in the imagination. In the desolate Kashmir now before my eyes, it was

difficult to hold on to rationality. In exile, I could dream of making films in Kashmir, but in Kashmir simply surviving and staying human was more difficult and liable to greater risks".(128) Thus what emerges from this self-examination of the author is the paradoxical function performed by the art of the director in voicing resistance. While the form necessarily requires a safe space for its creation (in fact, he mentions that Kashmir's current political scenario is adverse to the shooting of films), the content is envisioned through an imagination where the idea of home is not fleeting or transitory but forever frozen, thereby reflecting how we take them for granted. Here, exile ceases to be only a state of being rather it is enacted and enters into the domain of performance, as I had tried to foreground in the beginning.

Said in his essay on exile mentions three devices that are used to capture the spirit of exile: Wilfulness, exaggeration and overstatement. These devices which are founded on the principle of excess become necessary for a kind of self-assertion and to make the world believe what they themselves do not believe. (145) In a piece titled "Exile or Rejuvenation" written by Deepak Tiku, a Kashmiri Pandit migrant working in an MNC in Noida, he mentions how their state of exile has turned out to be rewarding for them because they can now bask in the glory of having acquired high-salaried jobs and living in attractive apartments, an opportunity they would have been deprived of, if they had stayed back in Kashmir. However the false determination which is displayed in the style of the prose is betrayed by his acknowledgement of how exile far from being spiritually invigorating has left them with a sense of emptiness, an ingraspable reality wherein their own identity and roots are unknown to them : "If we are asked to debate for our own rights to return to the homeland in any forum, we will not be able to represent our case because we are not aware about the history, culture, politics and philosophy of our race".(197) The trope of vulnerability recurs in this account where the exiled is the product of a social vulnerability which is simultaneously assertive and exposed. In this context, Judith Butler notes, "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure".(20) It is precisely this idea of vulnerability that forms the basis of an individual's right to life. In the case of the exiled, especially in the case of the Kashmiri Pandit migrant, the right to life becomes ironical because his status as an internally displaced person often do not give him the necessary protection and security that is granted to a "refugee", which is not only social but also emotional rehabilitation.

As a counter-point to the proposition above, I would also state that vulnerability of the exile and the consequent fear of being rejected and not taken seriously may also spur the individual to turn vulnerability into a creative force, whereby vulnerability takes the form of humour that allows one to articulate in a language that would have otherwise remained unspoken. In an essay "Humour in Exile", Shyam Kaul mentions two such instances. First, he talks about a theatre-group in Kashmir who staged a play about Kashmir Pandits, where the Pandit was caged and people came to see him "as a living relic of a human community which had become extinct".(180) Secondly, he recollects how a Pandit who had submitted three petitions but were all rejected returns back to him with a poem containing his grievances because the Pandit had been warned that he would be reported against if he presented another petition. One cannot fail to notice the tragi-comedy of these situations where the alternative modes of making oneself heard are triviality and self-mockery.

### Hospitality, Ethics and the Migrant

Jacques Derrida in his essay “Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality” talks about two kinds of hospitality: one is universal and unlimited hospitality which does not take into consideration the name or position of the people and offers him hospitality without any conditions while on the other hand, the concept of conditional law of hospitality demands certain prerequisites, whereby the sovereignty of either the host state or the persona of the host is foregrounded. In this context, Derrida recalls Kant and writes in his essay “On Cosmopolitanism”:

... in defining hospitality in all its rigour as a law (which counts in this respect as progress), Kant assigns to it conditions which make it dependent on state sovereignty, especially when it is a question of the *right of residence*. Hospitality signifies here the *public nature (publicité)* of public space, as is always the case for the juridical in the Kantian sense; hospitality, whether public or private, is dependent on and controlled by the law and the state police. This is of great consequence, particularly for the ‘violations of hospitality’ about which we have spoken considerably. (22)

The reason I engage in a discussion of what determines the principle of hospitality is to investigate the complex relationship that exists between a person in exile and his right to hospitality (if any). Historically speaking, once the Kashmiri Pandits left the valley they were given shelters at various camps in Jammu and most of these camps were in a despicable situation. Later some of the residents of these camps managed to get a one-room shelter for themselves. One notes a paradox in this situation where the power of the state to defend the basic human rights of its citizens are constantly declining (the Pandits would not have to leave the valley at the first place, had the state been able to give them the required safety and protection) but one also needs the mechanisms of the state to ensure a citizen’s social right of residence and living. However the state’s role as a benefactor need not be necessarily extended to its safekeepers. A case in point would be the short story “Refugee in My Own Country” written by Juhi R. Kuchroo and Manik R. Kuchroo where the narrator talks about her experience in a camp and the hostility often meted out to the Kashmiri migrant.

‘Shweta, don’t start. You have no idea how hard it is working in my department.’ The lady smacked her lips together and they both entered different stalls. ‘I tell you, these refugees.’....

‘Which refugees, Tanuja?’ the other one asked.

“These Kashmiri ones.’ I felt myself blush.

‘They always expect so much. I mean, we give them a tent and some ration cards, but they always get angry. What do they expect, a house? They should be grateful that we are doing this much. We don’t have to do anything at all.’(100)

Hence hospitality, here is based on the premise of a certain kind of privilege and power. The exploration of this relationship might be even more fruitful, if we enter into the etymological history of the word “hospitality” which has its origins in

the Latin root word 'hospes' meaning stranger or enemy. On the other hand, both 'hostile' and 'host' derives from the same root word 'hostis'. Therefore, going by this logic, the host is always hostile to the stranger. Although Derrida does not provide detailed account of the etymological history of the word, it is highly improbable especially considering his playful usage of words, throughout his career that he was not aware of it. The interaction between the host and the guest/hostage is indeed a critical one but what he does not take into consideration is how the hostage can put the onus onto the host and in turn hold the host in a position whereby alterity is encountered and enacted. I would use two specific examples to substantiate my argument. In the short story "The Kidnapping" by Maharaj Krishen Santoshi, the narrator is kidnapped but on being kidnapped he is extended warmth and hospitality that he never expected and then it turns out that he was kidnapped by an old friend, Abdul Gani who was missing him and had kidnapped him in order to have the conversations with him once again. Here is an excerpt from the story that needs analysis:

'Don't you want freedom?' he asked ironically. But I was strong with my silence.

'I will kill if you don't speak,' he threatened me.

'What should I say?' I asked.

'Why have you forgotten those days when you involved me in discussions?'

'You were a friend then.'

'Now?'

'Now, you are my kidnapper.'(30)

The kidnapper does not expect silence or muteness, especially when his main purpose is to engage in an interaction, however by choosing to remain silent, the limits of speech are utilized for realization of one's self, whereby the Other is displaced, in terms of Levinasian philosophy of ethics. In fact, the person who has been kidnapped is conscious about how this displacement of the host also results in "displacement of other possibilities of existence"(Levinas 26) inhabited by the host. It is fundamentally a condition which also aims at describing how our experiences can also be mapped through the ethical relationship that we share with the Other. Similarly in S.N. Dhar's non-fictional work *Eighty-three Days: The Story of a Frozen River*, the narrator is held hostage by militants and while living with them he becomes aware of how knowledge of Islam of most of the militants is delimited and circumscribed. He mentions of an instance where the Amir, who was somewhat conversant in Islamic theology asks him why he refuses to convert into Islam in spite of accepting that Quran is the last word. The narrator replies:

'You win,' I said carefully, 'but don't you think I must observe you for some time more as to understand how you think, what you do and how you live generally because you would be my role-model! Besides, my conversion in captivity may not be good for the tehrik at this stage,' I completed haltingly, with utmost caution. (182)

The reply made by the narrator is strategic and measured in such a way that the host or the kidnapper is left with no option but an acceptance of his defeat. However what certainly cannot be ignored is how even this response is necessarily conditioned by circumstances that do not allow him to say a “Yes” or “No”. It is a moment of disjuncture that facilitated the formation of alterity. To quote Levinas,

The encounter with alterity is at once the very scene of sociality and a disturbing trace of that which cannot be contained within the present order of the world, but always disturbs it. The response that the Other demands is a sacrifice or substitution of the self for the other, a one-for-the-other that is like ‘being held hostage’ by the Other. Even when one has refused the call of the Other, one has not escaped responsibility, but has made a particular kind of response to it. (quoted in Parikh, 652)

However what I am also concerned about is how in this dialectic of the host and hostage, perpetrator and victim, there is a possibility to miss out how this positions are almost always unstable, where the instability lies *not* in their interchangeability but in the specific locations in which they are constituted. What if a person chooses to “perpetrate” or transgress his boundaries out of an ethics of relationship to Others? In the short story, “The Unfinished Story” by Rashneek Kher and in the novel *Under the Shadow of Militancy*, Rasuljoo and Sonahjoo are Muslim characters who either give the Kashmiri Pandits shelter or take their sides in times of crisis. In doing so, they are perpetrating by the standards that Islamic Militants expect of them but the responsibility which is shown by them are justified on ground of humanity and compassion. I am not advocating a quasi-moral justification of a perpetrator’s action but one certainly needs to remain alert about who the perpetrator is and in what circumstances.

### **Memory and Trauma**

The unreliability of memory and its role in representation of events has received much attention in recent scholarship by historians, sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists. My prime objective in this section is to understand what role does trauma experienced by Kashmiri Pandit migrants play in recuperation of “cultural memory”. The concept of cultural memory is somewhat problematised by the fact that any history is personal, intimate and subjective by nature but what cannot be denied is how the universal needs to be conceived in the mind of the individual. In the story, “The Survivor” by K.L. Chowdhury, the protagonist Satish Bhat recollects how he had escaped from the night of the massacre when his family members were brutally killed. On being asked why the details of the massacre are still unknown, he asserts that the officials “know it too well but do not want to own it”. (34) Manfred Weinberg, an anthropologist notes that “trauma is the inaccessible truth of remembering” (205) where truth is objectively present but never manifested or represented. However the mediation of these memories are of paramount importance because “trauma is [not only] disruptive of settled stories [but also] threatens centralized political authority based on such stories and opens up venues for political resistance “(Kansteiner and Weilnbock 234). In the case of Satish Bhat, the political resistance is captured in the restructuring of his life whereby he has got married and there is semblance of peace and order, but where the memories continue to daze him in a dream. He writes, “...I wish I had not survived that night. That would have been better than living with the

wounds that neither heal nor kill. I seem to be running away all the time, in my dreams and while awake". (34) Therefore the trauma of such an exiled individual makes one reassess the cultural memory contained within and by the political.

What I have primarily argued in the essay is how exile, which is often a result of the fractures opened up by the nation-state creates an ambivalent space for interaction and negotiation of multiple coordinates: memory, hospitality and ethics such that it acquires an exclusive status. However it is precisely in such a liminal site where the discontents of the nation are narrativised and inscribed to an end often irreconcilable and perhaps indistinct.

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#### BIO-NOTE

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Sritama Chatterjee is an M.Phil Research Scholar at the Department of English Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She completed her graduation from Presidency University and post-graduation from Jadavpur University in 2014 and 2016 respectively. For her M.Phil thesis, in which she is interrogating how the river Hugli served as an instrument of imperial governance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial Bengal, she has been awarded the Sasakhawa Youth Leader Fellowship(SYLFF) from Tokyo Foundation, Japan. Prior to this, she has worked as a Project Assistant in a EU-India collaborative Project on online learning titled, Project E-QUAL. Her research interests include Postcolonial Literature and Theory, The Novel, Indian Ocean Studies, Labour History and Environmental Humanities.

She can be contacted at [sritamachatterjee36@gmail.com](mailto:sritamachatterjee36@gmail.com)