

# Recalling the Past: Political Turmoil and Displacement in Siddhartha Gigoo's *Garden of Solitude*

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## Abstract

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary branch which integrates academic strings from the fields of literature, education, anthropology, philosophy, history, psychology and sociology. The inception of this field was through examining and studying how human beings remember things and it extended and grew by looking at how memory of the public or societies were formed. Some important theorists of memory studies include Maurice Halbwachs, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Paul Ricoeur, etc.

Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* is his debut novel which throws light on the plight of kashmiri pandits and their lives in displacement in the novel. The aims and objectives of this paper is to apply Hugo Von Hofmannsthal and Halbwachs's theory of collective memory and the concept of post memory by Marianne Hirsch to analyse the elements of memory in *The Garden of solitude*. Halbwachs stated that individuals cannot recall and remember things independently of their group contexts. He looked at individual and collective memories as means to through which social groups draw an individual's sense of identity and belonging.

Marianne Hirsh in "The Generation of Postmemory" says "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). It is the transmission of trauma from individuals who experienced trauma first hand to their second and third generation.

**Keywords:** memory, displacement, trauma, nostalgia, mass migration, postmemory, collective memory

Memory is the ability or the process of recalling what was already acquired. Memory studies is a multidisciplinary branch which integrates academic strings from the fields of literature, education, anthropology, philosophy, history, psychology and sociology. The inception of this field was through examining and studying how human beings remember things and it extended and grew by looking at how memory of the public or societies were formed. A few of the important theorists of memory studies include Maurice Halbwachs, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, Paul Ricoeur, etc. The concept of memory itself is to remember and record events happening around. This concept is picked up by authors to record the past through narratives that have a strong historical background. Siddhartha Gigoo is an Indian writer who has made use of the concept of memory impeccably in his book *The Garden of Solitude*.

Siddhartha Gigoo was born in Srinagar in 1974. He is an alumni of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. The common themes he dealt with in his books were love, loss, hope, and longing. Gigoo is also the acclaimed author of numerous books which include *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits*, *Mehr: A Love Story*. He won the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (Asia) for *The Umbrella Man* in 2015. His Short films, *The Last Day*, *Goodbye*, *Mayfly* have won many awards and recognitions at international film festivals. *The Garden of Solitude* is his debut novel published in 2011. Gigoo throws light on the plight of kashmiri pandits and their lives in exile in the novel.

The aims and objectives of this paper is to apply Hugo Von Hofmannsthal and Halbwachs's theory of collective memory and the concept of post memory by Marianne Hirsch to analyse the elements of memory in *The Garden of Solitude*. The term collective memory was coined by Hofmannsthal and Halbwachs developed the concept. Halbwachs stated that individuals cannot recall and remember things independently of their group contexts. Emily Keightley in her "Remembering research: memory and methodology in the social sciences" states "Remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another" (58). Halbwachs found the idea of memory being completely psychological faulty and rejected it. He looked at individual and collective memories as means to through which social groups draw an individual's sense of identity and belonging. Halbwachs says "history is a dead memory, a way of preserving pasts to which we no longer have an "organic" experiential relation" and stated that "this understanding of the distinction negates the self-image of historiography as the more important or appropriate attitude towards the past: History's epistemological claim is devalued in favour of memory's meaningfulness" (Olick and Robbins 2004, p. 110). Wulf Kansteiner in *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies* states:

Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals...It is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated. And it can only be observed in roundabout ways, more through its effects than its characteristics. In essence, collective memory studies represent a new approach to "that most elusive of phenomena, popular consciousness.

Marianne Hirsch in "The Generation of Postmemory" says "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). It is the transmission of trauma from individuals who experienced trauma first hand to their second and third generation. They feel and remember this trauma through pictures they see and feel or stories they listen to, and behaviors among which they grew up. These emotions and experiences are transferred to them so deeply and it is ingrained in them and affect them which might even feel like those memories were solely theirs, in their own right.

Published in the year 2011 *The Garden of Solitude* is not just about a kashmiri pandit boy forced to leave his homeland but it is a documentation of armed insurgency, political turmoil, militancy, displacement and trauma of several pandits and their families fleeing from the Kashmir valley. The book has an autobiographical touch with the author and his family being a victim of the political upheaval in Kashmir. Families fled to survive violence and took shelter in camps spending months in unhygienic circumstances. Women especially went through tough times managing to keep the family alive and keeping themselves

strong mentally more than physically. Quality education for their children and meeting out basic necessities became a faraway dream. The following lines best sum up life in Kashmir “ In Kashmir there were the fearsome curfew, crossfire, gun battles, killings and horror. Here we are at war with our ourselves. We despise everything. Our relationships have turned us into ugly creatures. We eat and defacate...” (TGS 104).

The family around which the plot of the novel revolves is that of Sridar’s. He is an aspiring writer who witnessed militancy at the age of 14. He heard calls for harthal everyday and it kept him indoors spending most of his time dusting his books and filling the pages of his diary. His grandfather, Mahanandju, was a much respected person in the neighbourhood both by muslims and the pandits. He practiced traditional medicine and cured many people of bone ailments with a mixture of herbs. He learned the art of curing bone diseases from his father Gulabju. Gulabju was the first person in the family who left Kashmir for foreign lands. Lasa, Sridhar’s father was very friendly with the muslim neighbours but unfortunately he could not continue their friendship because the situation was getting tensed with the pandits asked to evacuate. Lasa and his wife packed the household belongings, getting ready to leave if the situation worsens. Soon Lasa and his family had to leave Kashmir with not even half of their belongings. “ There was noone to talk to. Pandits feared for their lives and saw to it that nobody came to know about their silent exit” (TGS 61).

Survival was the only need for people to migrate. People like Lasa with three generations alive, left their homes just to make sure that their parents and children were alive. Lasa wondered if this act of migrating was one of cowardice or of strength. Uncertainty engulfed the pandit families and they left their homes only carrying a hope to return soon. In Jammu, Lasa understood that life from then on is going to be a nightmare. Qazigund where all buses to Jammu stopped saw people with children and belongings amidst the chaos and noise. Every truck that carried them also carried hopelessness.

The past seemed distant and it was recollected with a longing to relive. The irony was that “The present was just a crippled memory, a child’s play, a bubble” (TGS 70). While memory is to do with nostalgia and longing for the past the author describes the present as a crippled memory ironically stating that the peaceful past remains a longing and the grief-stricken present is going to become a memory.

The government school which was converted into a camp stands as a symbol of shelter for a community that was forced to migrate. The reality was ugly but the unity and harmony in greeting and accommodating new acquaintances was heartwarming. The conditions in the camp were getting worse day by day with limited latrines and unhygienic surroundings. Mahanandju representing the old generation of Pandits found life difficult as days went by, “I am a man without a reflection” (TGS 85). He remarked searching for a mirror and not finding one. The calendar lost its meaning for him. He lived in the past and started liking his loneliness. The beauty of Kashmir and his old home kept flashing throughout the day that he spent time only reflecting on the past. Whenever Mahanandju met someone from his hometown their conversation was also filled only with past tales. Life became monotonous to Mahanandju who did nothing but shaving in the morning and fanning himself engrossed in the past for the rest of the day. His memory at times deceived him but remained sharp with the dates and sequence of events that occurred. He lost his appetite. The most disturbing act of Mahanandju was standing in front of the shaving mirror and crying silently. Sometimes he spoke to himself. To an outsider, he might seem insane. But for the readers, he stands as a representation of a generation which had lived in peace and witnessed the destruction of the same. He had no interest in staying tuned to the happenings of the current times. When questioned why, he responded:

The news yesterday was the same as it was the day before yesterday. It will be the same even today. They will say dozens of people died and hundreds got injured. Nobody knows the truth. Falsehood has become the truth and people like to listen to things which are not true. Bombs and grenade attacks! The prime minister said this and that. Throw the radio out of the window. Banish it. (TGS 113)

Mahanandju was engulfed with idleness and a vacuum that could not be explained in words. His mental health declined. He experienced delusions. He was sleep-deprived and his mind was unstable, oscillating between the past and the present, real and imaginary. The plight of a generation which was losing itself to memory cannot be better described than this:

As days progressed, Mahanandju's memory became more and more fragmented. He narrated the events which no one knew or remembered ever happened in his life. Darkness invaded his days. Darkness descended like a plague and tore every ray of light that shone in his heart and soul. Nothing that his wife said and did was able to change this state. Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew that this was irreversible. The man who always sat cross-legged for hours while doing nothing in the living room, had started to walk with a stoop. Although he did not complain of tiredness, he spent most of the time lying down on the floor. (115)

Any human who loses control over his mind is a worse situation for which death alone can become a resolution. He was living with a son who had accepted migration and a grandson who was able to think of future prospects. Mahanandju and his generation collectively lived in a world of memory, nostalgia, loss of land, and hopelessness. It reaches a point where the grandfather does not recognise his grandchild. He soon becomes bedridden with sores appearing on his body. He was entangled as the author remarks “. . . in a web of defeat and helplessness” (TGS 173). The family that awaited him to fade away finally witnessed his breath stopping.

Sridar was the third generation male member of the family of Kashmiri Pandits. Gigoo presents in his novel. He belongs to a generation that adapts easily to the political turmoil that leads to mass migration of his community. His concern was to survive militancy and achieve his aspirations not on a selfish note but understanding his responsibility as the only son. The militancy interests him as a youngster in seeing guns and other weapons used in the civil war. His liking for books began very early in his life, “He wanted to become a writer. He maintained a journal from the age of eleven. . . . writing and reading became an obsession” (TGS 6). He was a strange child unlike the boys of his age, engrossed in the world of nature sitting by the window side and reading. Dreams and Sridar are synonymous with fulfillment and aspiration throughout the book. He often wakes up in the midst of a dream that he remembers so well unlike many. Sridar is portrayed as an intelligent young man following his dreams even during the toughest of times with the total support of his father Lasa. His grandfather means the world to him. His anecdotes have been a source of inspiration to him. Sridar has a dream that is not really big or something that cannot be followed. His philosophy of life was simple, “Life teaches us that there is beauty in ugliness” (TGS 96). He too falls in love a couple of times like anybody else of his age. He longed to go back to Jammu while in Shimla and Delhi and only wished to stay with his old parents. “I would love to write. Everyone here is leaving this place in search of a job. Sitting for tests and interviews make me nervous. Who would employ a lazy man like me?” (TGS 142). Unfortunately he ends up taking a job in Delhi and even goes to New York. Wherever he is he always wanted to write. Life is measured and drawn with the scale so that the individual squeezes himself to fit into it. Sridar also fits himself perfectly into the given shape.

Sridar did experience the horrors of militancy and displacement, but his memory was constructed deeply by the inputs given by his father and grandfather. He shared and felt the pain of losing homeland and rec-

ollected happy memories of the past from his family members. Through this, though he moved out, travelled to places, lived in better conditions, he still yearned to go back to Kashmir. Because he knew that Kashmir was where he truly belonged. It has the smell of his family and lineage.

Memory of the events, happy or traumatic, that individuals experience make them who they are. It creates their identity. Memories are significant in the lives of human beings as it bring about the changing sense of who they become and what they become. Mahanandju lived in pre-displacement Kashmir and had firsthand experiences. He tries to preserve his collective memory and heritage despite the trauma he had undergone. On the other hand, Sridar was a child during the period of forced migration and he grew up disconnected from direct experiences of Kashmir before exile. The way he looked and experienced Kashmir is through stories told by and emotional weight carried by people like Mahanandju. While the first generation remembers recollects, and grieve for their loss with nostalgia, the third generation feels a sense of loss and longing trying hard to piece together an identity from memories they have never lived.

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