In the Throes of Exile: K L Chowdhury’s Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

The exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the wake of the rise of separatist sentiment, like other displacements, has given birth to a plethora of writings. The sentiments of homelessness, nostalgia and alienation get amply reflected in the writings of all Kashmiri Pandits. This paper undertakes to study some of the stories from Dr K L Chowdhury’s Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir and explore the ways in which the author negotiates the sense of loss, terror, horror, alienation and homelessness in the lives of ordinary kashmiri pandits as a result armed struggle in Kashmir and the subsequent ouster of kashmiri pandits from the valley. It is pertinent to mention here that this paper deals with the treatment meted out to Kashmiri pandits after the exodus and their settlement in other parts of the country especially the apathy, bad living condition health hazards etc.

Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir (2012) is a collection of narratives depicting the social, economic and psychological trauma which Kashmiri Pandits went through in the times of armed struggle in Kashmir. It draws upon the nostalgic pull for the homeland and also the predicament, harassment and sense of loss as well as alienation which the Pandits experienced after they left Kashmir and settled in different parts of India. Dr. K L Chowdhury, the author of Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir (2012), is a displaced Kashmiri Pandit living in exile in Jammu province of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, an accomplished physician specialized in neurology is a medical practitioner popular among Kashmiri Pandits, Muslims and residents of Jammu. Beside his busy life as an accomplished doctor, Dr. Chowdhury manages to squeeze time for writing novels, short stories, poetry and travelogues. Amit Shankar Saha, in his article, “Exile Literature and the Diasporic Indian Writer” aptly observes that “Displacement, whether forced or self imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them”(Saha,186). Although, Dr Chowdhury has been comfortably and successfully settled in Jammu, he feels a strong sense of damage that history has caused to the original residents of Kashmir. The geographical separation from his homeland does not sever the mental ties with his cradle, i.e., Kashmir and it is this psychological relationship which ignites the creative zeal in other’s mind to give expression through writing. Despite his secure settlement outside Kashmir, Dr Chowdhury does not remain unaware of the shock that the exodus has caused to sub multitude of Kashmiri Pandits. Amit S Shaw has very aptly, summed up the anxiety related to search a writer as Dr Chowdhury thus:

“Exile appears both as a liberating experience as well as a shocking experience. The paradox is apparent because it is just a manifestation of the tension that keeps the strings attached and taut between the writer’s place of origin and the place of exile. Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of the enmeshing string is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. The relief is only a temporary condition for no writer’s work is so sharp a wedge that can snap the strings that history - makers have woven. Even if a writer consciously tries to justify one end, simultaneously but unconsciously there arises a longing for the other. Therein lies the fascination of exile literature” (Hassan, 12)

The most important works produced by him are Of Gods Men and Militants (2000), A Thousand Petalled Garland and other Poems (2013) Enchanting World of Infants (2008), 48: Hours A Travelogue in Kashmir (2011) and Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir (2012). The exodus from Kashmir, following the Separatist upheaval of late 1980’s broke the socio-cultural and economic structure of Kashmiri Pandit who found themselves scattered and floating aimlessly in search of modes of minimum survival. This forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the

“Valley to different parts of India had a negative impact on this relationship. No doubt, there have been differences between the two communities on various socio-economic and political issues, but till the late 1980’s it never led to confrontations on a scale that would make one of the communities feel insecure in their own homeland. It was the
tolerance, defined in terms of Kashmiriyat, which kept the two communities together. The migration of Pandits posed a threat to the secular fabric of Kashmiriyat. There has also been change in the conceptualization of Kashmiriyat by Kashmiri Pandits after migration.” (Hassan, 12)

The stories have been written in a very descriptive manner about the Kashmiri People who were hounded out of their hearth to the other parts of country. Dr. Chowdhury compares the exodus with a shipwreck when he says, “The exodus scattered the Pandits like people in a shipwreck. Some drowned in the first storm of violence; other found rafts that carried them to far off lands, yet others are still floating in the choppy seas and struggling to reach shores.” (Faith and Frenzy 84). Be it Brij Nath of A Place to Die, or Bal Krishen from The Social Activist, all these characters find themselves in the whirlwind of displacement and go through unbearable pangs which it offers. In the story A Place to Die Brij Nath daftari, 62 years old retired clerk in the Ordinance Department of the central government is suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer. (83). The first person narrative stands employed by the author that gives realistic touch to the stories and validates the truth about the incidents narrated in them. A Place to Die is the most tragic of the stories in this collection which doesn’t revolve around the issues of survival, well being and insecurity but centers around the issue of death. Dr. Chowdhury identifies Brij Nath as a person he knew in his real life thus:

“I knew Brij Nath from the time he came to me with his little daughter Rita who had contracted tuberculosis. Subsequently I treated his son Ashok, for a rheumatic affliction of the heart, and his wife for various ailments. I became their family physician and friend until the time the valley was overtaken by a cataclysm that bruised and sundered relationships and drove hundreds of thousands into exile”. (83-84)

Suffering from terminal stage of cancer, something the author describe as “Death waiting in the shadow.” Brij Nath and his family run from pillar to post to find a roof over his head and a place to die in Jammu. Most of the landlords were unwilling to rent even a single room to his family with a dying man. The family was forced to vacate one house after the other. One of the landlords

“was unhappy when he figured out the number of people visiting his sick tenant everyday from the piles of footwear outside the one room he had rented out to Brij Nath and his family- his wife, son and daughter. He did not like crowds in his already cramped house. The traffic in the shared corridor and the shared toilet was too much to bear. The place was getting choked.” (85)

Due to the continuous inflow of the refugees the rents of the accommodation in Jammu had suddenly shot-up and most of the Pandits had to settle either in makeshift tents provided by the government or ramshackled accommodation available in houses, stables, cellars and stores. Moreover, the burning heat of Jammu added to the woes of Pandit’s who were forced to leave the salubrious climes of Kashmir. Ashok, Brij Nath’s son, manages to find another rented accommodation in the old Jammu city, something which Dr. Chowdhury describes as “bleak retreat”. The new accommodation was:

“A poorly ventilated room in a dilapidated house in the innermost recesses of the old city…. It was literally moving from the frying pan into the fire. Brij Nath’s condition deteriorated rapidly. He grew claustrophobic in this dark damp room. The plaster was peeling off the walls, sculpting monstrous shapes that took the visage of Yama and frightened him. A small window in a wrought-iron frame looked out at the grimy lane outside, bringing in stench from the drains. He asked them to keep them shut but that made the room even hotter. The fan, the only means available to beat the heat, blew gusts of hot air on his already febrile and famished frame.” (86-87)

Though the desire to go back to their homeland remained prominent for the characters of Faith and Frenzy but for Brij Nath life in Jammu, besides being a search for a place to die, remained one of, “Broken memories, sloughed-off selves,… violated privacies,… extinguished futures… the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home.”(Salman Rushdie, the satanic verses from Quotes about displacement). Given the unbearable circumstances in Jammu due to extreme heat, homelessness and the pathetic living conditions, for Brij Nath, “It is better to face bullets in Kashmir than burn in the living hell here” (88). The landlord of the rented accommodation forces the family to vacate the house as soon as possible because he didn’t want a stranger to die in his house. Finally it was the author narrator, Dr. K. L. Chowdhury who floated the idea of an advertisement in a daily local news paper asking for accommodation. The pathos hits the ceiling when Dr. Chowdhury scribbles the advertisement and hand over to Ashok, which is

“Wanted: A Place to Die.
Family of four, one of them sick and dying, in desperate need of lodgings. Size of accommodation and rent no consideration; just enough space to die”. (91)

The pathos depicted in the advertisement could invite only one response from the entire Jammu district that offered an accommodation of two rooms at Nanak Nagar. The landlord was a philanthropic Sardar Gurbax Singh who not only offered the accommodation without settling the rent in advance but also invited the whole family for dinner. He is the only landlord who doesn’t mind a dying person at his home but rather welcomed him. In his response to Ashok’s enquiry about rent Gurbax Singh says:

“Who is bothered about the rent, young man? Pay whatever you think is right and when you have the money. I demand no advance and no security deposit. This is a matter of death; monetary considerations are unbecoming in such a situation… well, my home is here to welcome death, if that is what you are bringing along with you. Everyone has to die one day, some sooner than later”. (91-92).

In the uncertainty and hopelessness of life in exile Sardar Gurbax Singh emerges as a beacon of hope for Brij Nath’s family. He opens the gates of compassions, love, humanism and brotherhood for this stranded family that has been running from pillar to post for nothing covetous but a house where Brij Nath could die respectfully. Ashok is so overwhelmed with Gurbax Singh response that he tells his father Brij Nath, “We are returning home tomorrow Father”. (92)
accommodation provided by Sardar Gurbux Singh virtually becomes a home for the family displaced and lost in the mesh of exile. It is only here that a new hue of life appeared on the face of Brij Nath which can be described as in the words of Dr Chowdhury as “contentment, the same contentment that he had worn as a motif of plain-living all his life.”(93) One is tempted to conclude that such political and territorial upheavals affect the common people having the ‘motif of plain-living’ not those who are responsible for such happenings.

The short story What Does A Pandit Look Like? is a striking example of the utter alienation of Kashmiri Pandits in their home land where they have lived for generations? It narrates the exodus of Mohan Lal’s family from Kashmir and his visit to his home back in Kashmir on the behest of his close friend and neighbor Mohammed Syed. During his visit, after a long stay in Jammu, he finds himself surrounded by a number of children mostly orphans who wanted to know, as to what does a Pandit looks like. In response to the curiosity of the children; Mohan Lal introduces himself as follows:

My name is Mohan Lal Safaya and I am a Kashmiri Pandit. I have eyes and ears like you, I speak the same language as you, eat the same food as you, think like you, dream like you. I have children who are like you. Infact it feels like you all are my own children. Motiyar was my home, I lived here with my wife, mother and two children in that house, over there. That was our small beautiful world.”(151)

The need for Moti Lal to convince the children regarding the appearance and existence of a Kashmiri Pandit in his own cradle, i.e. Kashmir, brings to the surface the ugliest manifestation of Exile and Displacement. The repeated use of the phrase “like you” in the Mohan Lal’s address to the children uncovers the gulf that the armed struggle of the separatist has created between the subsequent generations of the Muslim children in the valley and the exiled Kashmiri Pandits, so much so that the queer question as to what a Pandit looks like has arisen. Towards the end of his address:

“As he pointed at his house across the lane, he stopped suddenly, took a deep sigh and started sobbing loudly. His face was contorted with emotion and he started crying like a child, stuffing the whole gathering of children and adults alike into dead silence. Mohammed Syed and other adults rose to control him. The women who had gathered wiped their tearful eyes. There was general sighing, sobbing and sniffing in the hall.”(151)

It is the direct encounter with his own home that triggers the most intense emotion, helplessness and the sense of rootlessness from his homeland Moti Lal’s outburst on the reference of his home makes Mohammed Syed and the others gathered cry which implies that the emotions and attachment linked with the home is universal. The song sung by the women gathered inside Syed’s home in the honor of Moti Lal, “ evoked memories of his past life in Rainawari – the sound and smells, the springs and the snows, the lakes and the shikaras, the temples and the mosques, Shivratries and the Eids.”(152) By means of moving back in the memory lanes through the character of Mohan Lal, Dr. K L Chopdhwary nostalgically recreates the ambiance of an exclusive Kashmiri Pandit locality called Rainawari, the ambiance that encapsulates the smells of the seasons, visuals as well as communal harmony that once existed in Kashmir. Hard pressed by Mohammed Syed to have a close look at the Mohan Lal’s home, he finds it occupied by new incumbents. From a window from Mohan Lal’s home, “a middle aged couple, looked out and smiled genially at him the curious smile proud home owners would give to a casual passer by.” (153) The conversation between Mohammed Syed and Mohan Lal with which the story ends is worth quoting here:

What about the visit to your house? Don’t you want to go in and tell the people there that they will have to vacate it soon?” Mohammad Syed asked. I don’t think I will. Seventeen years is a long time, my friend. A lot has changed. Spaces that we left behind have been filled. Displacement can be terrible for anyone. I know it. I have experienced it,” Mohan Lal replied after a long pause.”(154)

The chilling response by Mohan Lal clearly refers to the spacio-temporal dimension of Displacement and Exile. The displacement has such deep rooted impact on the psyche of Mohan Lal that he can’t even think of asking the new incumbents to vacate his house which they have possibly occupied. Mohan Lal’s reluctance to enter his own house reminds one of Salman Rushdie’s reaction when he found himself standing infront of his house in Bombay after a long stay abroad. He, in an essay, Imaginary Homelands says, “Then I went to visit the house in the photograph and stood outside it, neither daring nor wishing to announce myself to its new owners. I didn’t want to see how they’d ruined the interior.”(Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 428) The sentence “displacement can be terrible for anyone” gives expression to the deep rooted pain and angst that the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits has caused to them. Through the character of Mohan Lal, Dr K L Chopdhwary expresses the obvious but painful reality that there is no place for Kashmiri Pandits in the valley as, “spaces that … (they)… left behind have been filled.”(154) [parenthesis mine]. Like other Kashmiri pandit writings, “one of the major thematic concerns of all the Pandit narrative is the loss of home. In fact, the loss of home metonymically symbolizes the loss of the homeland since the Pandits had to flee their homeland”. (Somjiyoti, 50)

The short story The Social Activist narrates another pathetic situation where a Kashmiri Pandit Bal Krishen, who calls himself a social activist has to tell bundle of lies to the author narrator Dr K L Chopdhury in order to procure school fee for his children. On being asked about his property back in Kashmir, Bal Krishen replies to Dr. Chopdhury, “Our house at Devsar, Kullam, was looted burnt down. The small land holding fetched a paltry sum with which my father married me to a girl from a poor family in the refugee camp. My in-laws too had fled from Kashmir and belonged to Vesu. My two children were born in the tent.”(211) Bal Krishen concocts a story that there is a poor man living in the migrant camp Mishripala, at Jammu, who needs money in order to pay tuition fee for his children and proposes to bring him to Dr K L Chopdhury to validate his story. But, on the appointed day Bal Krishen reaches alone at Dr Chopdhury’s place and to the author’s surprise he says, “Sir, the truth is that I am the father of the boy I spoke to you about. I made up the story as if it were somebody else when, in fact, it is me.”(209) The vicissitudes of exile endangered the unexpected situations for migrants in which the self respect and dignity of Kashmiri pandits received a serious jolt. The activist in Dr Choudhury proves to be a keen observer of the men, manners and their situation in the times of unseen crisis that his Kashmiri brothers found themselves in. The stories under consideration
presents the pathos, excruciating pain and struggle that the exodus has inflicted upon Kashmiri pandits. The broken families, hunger disease and the struggle for minimum survival form the creative matrix of the stories interspersed with the thematic concern of loss, shock, alienation, homelessness and insecurity.

REFERENCES


