

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**BEYOND SILENCE AND VIOLENCE: WOMEN'S TESTIMONIES FROM KASHMIR**

---

**FARHEEN FARID**, Research Scholar, Dr. K. R. Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia

---

**Article Information**

**Article Received** : 05-03-2022

**Article Accepted** : 06-04-2022

**Article Published** : 08-04-2022

**DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4408**

**Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze the plight and predicament of women from Kashmir through a reading of Vidhu Vinod Chopra's movie, Shikara. Kashmiri Pandit community being a minority community in Kashmir faced exodus and had to migrate to different parts of the country owing to a rise in the militant activities in Kashmir post-1989. Internally displaced people still live as refugees in their own countries. This paper focuses on the narratives of women from the Kashmir conflict whose voices are often silenced and their experiences are filtered out from the political history of the valley.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri women, Silence, Displacement, Violence, Conflict

**Introduction:**

Facing restrictions because of the patriarchal norms of the society and surviving through a violent conflict, these women from Kashmir have had the toughest battles to fight both inside and outside of the home. The movie Shikara brings out the silences that grip the life of the female protagonist, a Kashmiri Pandit woman, and the women of her community who share the same experiences of struggling and surviving the violence that altered their realities forever. Even though the movie revolves around the male character, Shiv, one cannot overlook the predicament of women and the fears and insecurities they were subjected to during and after their forced migration. Silences work in multiple layers in the movie and the traumatic experiences are shown as flashbacks that the protagonist is deliberately trying to avoid but these episodes and encounters of violence have ingrained grave damage to the psychological health of the female protagonist, something she cannot escape. The combination of inadequate monitoring and mistrust of statutory agencies has hampered the process of obtaining accurate assessments of violence against Kashmiri women. When a woman lives in a society built on rigid patriarchal

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

ideologies or who is displaced from her homeland as a result of armed conflict, it becomes extremely difficult to survive and live a normal life.

Kashmiri Pandits, “are a numerically small yet historically privileged cultural and the religious community in the Muslim- majority region of Kashmir Valley in Jammu and Kashmir State in India.”(Duschinski 41). Quoting Hampton in her article, “Internally Displaced People: Some Observations,” Charu Malhotra describes Internally Displaced People as those who were, “forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence in particular as a result of, or to avoid the effects of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (Malhotra 71).

The exodus of the Pandit Community in Kashmir began after an increase in the insurgency and militancy in the valley post-1989. The events that followed led to an escalation of violence and fear was instilled among the Kashmiris who did not support the sentiment of independence as claimed by the extremists and secessionists. Prominent Hindu personalities were targeted by the militants, and the community felt insecure in such a tense and uncertain atmosphere and was thus forced to migrate and resettle outside their homeland. Insurgents were forcing Kashmiri society to act primarily as an Islamic state, so they wanted only Muslims to reside in Kashmir. Restrictions were imposed wherein girls were discouraged from going to school or to work. The concept of veils was introduced in which women were supposed to wear a certain kind of clothes only and those who opposed the rules, were harassed publicly(Duschinski 46-47). Most of the displaced people still live in pathetic conditions with no help from the government. The government provided one-room tenements per family where they faced pathetic living conditions with no privacy, which also brought about a lot of changes including a strain on marital relations.

In this paper, I am attempting to read the movie as a text that showcases the experience, the feelings, and the narratives associated with exile. As the title indicates, this paper aims to explore not just the dilemma faced by internally displaced people looking for their roots and striving hard to survive in dire conditions but also a community of women who is most vulnerable to suffer in the conflict managed to find a space of their own and came out much stronger than ever. Despite living in squalor, unable to work, away from home, and dependent on a refugee allowance, they managed to survive. They faced it all, confronted an uncertain life in camps, walked miles to fetch water, compromised on sanitation, were forced to use the same toilets as men, took up jobs, and completed their education despite all odds. Trapped within the

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

official narrative of geopolitics and loss of identity and culture, they weaved their lives around the threads of personal histories and their current realities.

Throughout the film, memories of exile tend to be fragmented and layered, suggesting an unstable perception of reality and time. But also, for the displaced community, in the most literal sense, home connotes both reality and the fleeting memory that it evokes and as Pifer suggests, "Memory of the past, recorded as history, keeps alive our sense of differentiation and identity; it prevents us from slipping into the "nameless infinity" of "undifferentiated reality." (Pifer, 65). In "Revisiting the Question of the Pandits- The Battle of the Narratives" Sadaf Munshi states, "every year, the people of the Kashmiri Pandit and Kashmiri Muslim communities commemorate January 1990 as the beginning of an era of two structurally different, but extremely bitter and painful experiences: the "exodus" of the former facilitated by an atmosphere of immense fear and terror, and the beginning of the cultural atrocities inflicted on the latter at the hands of the Indian state. It was a period that marked the beginning of an era of dissatisfaction on both sides, a sense of deceit, distrust, and disbelief." (Munshi 115).

**An Overview of the Movie, Shikara:**

Shikara is directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra and came out in the year 2020. The movie puts light on the narratives from the barbed land inked in blood and memory, and the absence of people and a home. Through the characters, Vidhu Vinod Chopra discusses themes of insecurity, nostalgia, reconciliation, dreams, and friendships. He emphasizes how the community constantly feels removed from their homeland and how their identities are entangled in the oppressive history of Kashmir and the residue of collective emotions. The movie opens up with a quote that reads, "This film is a work of fiction, based on real events...this film is dedicated to over 4,00,000 Kashmiri Pandit refugees who were thrown out of their homes in Kashmir valley 30 years ago. Those who are still alive continue to live as refugees in their own country"(Chopra 2020).

The movie begins by showing the protagonist, Shiv Kumar Dhar writing a letter about their predicament to the President of America from his refugee camp where he has been living for the past 28 years with his wife, Shanti. There are stills shown from the Muthi refugee camp in Jammu with dingy one-room houses clustered together. The frame looks deserted which suggests emptiness and at the same time portrays gloominess. The camp area has small lanes that pass alongside the ORTs (One Room Tenements). People have tried to recreate the life they were used to living with all that was available to them amid the uncertainties. The camera focuses on a small temple in the center which also signifies a symbol of this religious minority community that was uprooted because of their religion, but the temple is located right at the center hinting at

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

the power of faith of the community that has given them hope and strength to survive. Children are shown in the frame probably donot know of their history and have always known their life to be like this, dull and stagnant which is a contrast to the kind of life the community enjoyed back in Kashmir. These children may not be aware of the past but they certainly have inherited from their people, the longing for a home.

Taking the plot forward, Shivbooks a suite for his wife as she is sick and old and after living a miserable life for years, which took a toll on his wife Shanti's health, he just wanted to give her some moments of happiness away from the stress and make her feel the same level of comfort and happiness that she did back at home in Kashmir years ago. There in the hotel room, they watch a movie that was shot in Kashmir in 1987. It was the timewhen they were young and had met each other on the sets of the same movie for the very first time. This is the point where the flashback of a happy life and the trauma that followed strikes and the frame now shifts to the Kashmir of 1987.Kashmir of the 80s represents a secular environment where the bond between Hindus and Muslims is so strong and pure that a Muslim Kashmiri would easily sacrifice his life for a Hindu friend. Amidst the backdrop of a peaceful and happy environment with endless possibilities, Shiv and Shakti fall in love, dream of a future together, and get married. Themarriage ceremony is a concoction of diverse cultures where Muslim neighbors and friends are dancing to the tunes played by Pandit musicians, celebrating with them. While clicking the family photo, his friend Latif, who has been there with Shiv since childhood stands with him as a brother on his big day. Shiv is a research scholar and writer and has a promising future. After the ceremonies, they make love on a 'Shikara'- a boat amid a lake, where'Shikara'becomes a symbol of love, safety, freedom, and dreams. Shiv was enthusiastic about starting a career and building a new house for his wife, the foundation of which was built on the stones gifted by his Muslim friend, Latif. As they get busy with creating a perfect life for themselves, the first episode of violence barges in when Latif's father who is a politician is attacked and killed by the goons sent by the government, hinting at the rigged election of 1987. The subsequent frames introduce the tense relationship between the government and the people. The normal and happy frame turns grim and is filled with an air of strangeness. After the completion of the construction of their home, Shanti and Shiv shift into their dream abode. Shanti names it'Shikara'- for it symbolized a safe place filled with love and promises of togetherness and eternity for her. But little did she know that her happiness was short-lived and that the place she considers safe will become hostile to them. Differences started pouring in post-1989, with an increase in insurgencyand no one in their nightmares had thought of the possibility of what was to befall them.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

In the next frame, the focus is shifted to the missing students from colleges and universities which is an indication for they leaving educational institutes to recruit for militancy. Shiv is summoned by Latif, his dear friend who now after his father's planned death, has also picked up guns and is a hell-bent on taking revenge by becoming a militant. They take him to a far-off village where he is hiding and there, he asks Shiv to leave Kashmir immediately and sell his home as he was aware of what was to come and did not want him and his family to suffer. Shiv was not able to come to terms with his friend choosing this path for himself and what he just suggested. Both of these things were hard to accept. Soon after that, posters were pasted all around the valley that contained names of Pandit government officials written on them with a warning that they were supposed to leave within a month. On seeing Shiv's name written on the list, their Muslim neighbors assure them that nothing will happen and take responsibility for their security. In 1990, a normal evening spent at home with family where Shanti prepares a special Kashmiri delicacy 'Rogan josh' for dinner turns violent wherein they hear screams from the neighborhood and see houses gutted in the near vicinity. An atmosphere of fear spreads all around and it only escalates when Shanti sees shadows approaching her home. She closes all lights so that they don't spot her. This act of switching off the lights is a symbolic act wherein darkness covers everything and takes in its grasp even the minds and hearts of the people. They have only one agenda on their mind and burn down a portion of her home. Her abode and her haven 'Shikara' on which she had dreamed dreams were burning in the flames of hatred and propaganda right before her eyes. They are almost attacked by the goons but saved by their neighbor. Latif, Shiv's friend turned militant saved Shiv's parents from the mob and created a safe passage for them to leave. All these incidents left them with no choice but to think of moving to someplace safe till the situation got a little better and everything calmed down. They decided to book tickets for Delhi but nothing happened as per plan. They had to leave all of a sudden because of the circumstances that were created by taking all they could pick up in haste. Leaving their homes, they didn't know that this was going to be forever. They left in large numbers for Jammu, not knowing where destiny was taking them. They spent their nights on platforms, broken and drained but hopeful that they will be taken back soon. There was complete silence all around. Nobody had anything left to say and they were watching everything pass before their eyes. They were asked one after the other to verify documents and register. Hundreds piled up in one room, there was no proper food and a community who had lived comfortably in Kashmir had to fight for food for their survival. Large dormitories were allotted to them, wherein they made small separations by placing sheets and dupattas to create a safe place to lay down. This small area was their home now for months. The movie shows a transition from dorms to each family being allotted a tent to finally a one-room tenement. Their life was nothing less than misery for they suffered for no fault of theirs. A community was forced out of

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

their homes with nowhere to go and have been dreaming and hoping to return one day with dignity since then. It is for the same hope of a return, Shiv refuses to sell their house after repeated offers but finally sells it off to spend the money on his wife's treatment. After completing his Ph.D., Shiv decided not to move to a city where he was offered a job and remain behind and serve the children who had no school to go to and whose futures were at stake. Selling off their house meant that for them no hope of return was left as the only space of yearning had been sold off. Shanti supports her husband throughout and affirms that even though she had longed for a place she could call her home but has realized that 'home' resides in people and relationships. Soon with this contentment that she had her husband with her through thick and thin, she left for her final abode, her only wish being for her ashes to be mixed with the waters of Kashmir. This is how she wanted to return, if not in her life, but atleast in death. After his wife's death, Shiv decided to go back to Kashmir to his ancestral home whose ruins remained intact. The house in the last frame is a true depiction of the life of the Pandit community- torn, abandoned, looted, burnt, dilapidated, and yet standing tall. He comes back with the hope to restart his life from the shackles and the young kids filled with innocence, not aware of what happened in the past, gather around him in amazement as they are seeing a Kashmiri Pandit for the first time in their area.

**Women and the Kashmir Conflict:**

The Kashmiri Pandit narrative is predominantly composed of stories relating to men. Women's testimonies from Kashmir and their stories have rarely been talked about. As with any other community, the Kashmiri Pandit community is patriarchal in its beliefs and views women as inferior. Both Pandit women and Muslim women have been victimized by militants and security forces in the Kashmir conflict (Kumar 208). Conflict and patriarchy together made them more vulnerable to suffer directly or indirectly, "...it is men who are fighting a war or battle for themselves, for their desires, but the hardest brunt of this battle is borne by women- women from both sides, whether it is the side of the enemy or of the men who see themselves as fighting for a just cause, on both sides the situation of women is the same." (Butalia 185).

Society has its own set of traditions that culture the mindset of the people inhabiting it. In the light of this statement, a woman could be described as a social construct that gets trapped around the rules and conventions thus limiting her capacity to exercise agency. This framed identity, cultured by a dominant ideology, establishes and presses meanings to the idea and purpose of a woman's existence. The behavior of women has always been regulated through a social order which leaves them vulnerable, more so in a conflict situation. This question of agency, lack of say in things being imposed on a woman, dearth of choices available to her, and

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

others taking decisions on her behalf is however universal and transcends all the imposed boundaries communicating the dominance of a universal patriarchal ideology.

The female protagonist in the movie is shown only as a supporting character and an extra to the main story that revolves around the male protagonist. Everything is seen from the perspective of Shiv. She is a devout wife who has no career goals. Nobody is paying any attention to her dreams and aspirations; in fact, she is shown to have none. Neither the plot, the storyline, nor the narrative of the Kashmir conflict has given her the space she deserves. She is used as an aid to building up the narrative for the male protagonist to act on wherein he is shown as a savior, without whom Shanti has no identity of her own. She is the epitome of a stereotypical ideal wife that the movie is trying to project through her character. She does not have a voice or an opinion of her own and is shown as a submissive wife, keeping her struggles to herself, and not bothering her husband with complaints and her demands. All the violence around her and the forced displacement has had an impact on her mental health. Silence in the personal domain is a result of the social and political principles that are shaped by the historical elements in a given environment, which further construct a relationship between traumatic memories of the past, loss of culture, and fractured identities, particularly in circumstances of forced displacement. Due to social stigmas and fears of harming their family and community honor, people, especially women, tend not to speak up about it.

Shanti suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder and often gets anxiety attacks. Some incidents in her present life trigger the traumatic memories of her past. The first instance of humiliation in the movie that Shanti goes through happens when she is using public transport as usual and some random men on the bus identify her by her unique identity markers like a bindi and special kind of earrings that only Kashmiri Pandit women wore, ask her to cover her head. There is a deliberate attempt on part of the filmmakers to show a transition from happy visuals to a dark and grim atmosphere. Fear starts to creep in and she immediately takes off her bindi and these men are shown making fun of her as if they achieved something by humiliating a woman who is minding her own business and trying to reach home. With an increase in extremist activities and the advent of insurgency, there were warnings sent to Hindu men asking them to leave Kashmir without their wives. There was too much fear and everyone was concerned about the safety and well-being of the women in their community. Different dress codes were introduced to be followed which differentiated Muslim women from Hindu women. Women were the worst victims of the Kashmir conflict as they were physically and psychologically abused in Kashmir by the terrorists and had to face difficult situations after being displaced. There is gender-based violence in conflicts in which rape and sexual assault are recognized and

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

used as instruments that create a fear psychosis in the community and control its members (Butalia 2000). In the Kashmir conflict, many Kashmiri Pandit women were widowed and many were raped by the militants. In conflicts around the world, women suffer the most. Women in conflicts get targeted because they are seen as representing the honor of a particular community. Historically, women represented the community or nation in allegorical and symbolic ways. Not just this, Urvashi Butalia in her edited volume on experiences of Kashmiri women titled, "Speaking Peace: Women's voices from Kashmir" writes:

"Displacement has made life worse for them: communities and societies are scattered around, and women have to bear the burden of this. Men simply shrug off the responsibility. Indeed, there have been instances when men have taken it such that displacement means they can give up the responsibility of the family. Being homeless meant that they need not be responsible for the home. So the women had to take this on too: they had to run the home, look after the children, earn an income, and somehow keep their self-respect alive in the middle of this. And she had to take on the burden of looking after the men of the household too" (Butalia 188).

In another incident, when Shanti prepares the same Kashmiri delicacy that she made on the day their house was attacked, it triggers the traumatic memory and she relives the pain again. The trail of taste buds enabled her to retrace her way home but this time it was traumatic. Over the years, she never found a vent and is shown as suffering silently and never expressing it and trying to appear strong. She cannot talk about her fears and insecurities that led to the deterioration of her mental health. It is a conscious effort on part of her to not disclose a memory that only manifests the dominant patriarchal ideology in action. Butalia mentions that on her visits to refugee camps in Jammu and Delhi she noted that, "the conditions they had to live in were abominable. Small, dingy rooms, no light, often just one bed and a whole family of parents, children. Grandparents huddled together around it. We're a proud people, and here we were now, being forced to beg. The women and girls suffered many gynecological problems as a result of these cramped conditions of living. No privacy, no proper toilets...the psychological trauma that many people went through is still to be reckoned with." (180).

Having said this, experiences of women living in exile are also different owing to their class differences and social status which is linked with the availability of resources, qualifications, jobs, and a host of different parameters. Those who had resources and were educated could utilize opportunities and created a better life for themselves but those whose family members were not supportive or didn't have quality education or resources suffered and could not in any way bring a change in their situation and resorted to taking care of the

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

households and their children. Establishing a link between trauma, memory, and silence; they as women, aimed to leave a lasting legacy of who they were, who they are, and even what they dream of.

**Conclusion:**

Women from Kashmir, just like in any other conflict couldn't choose the life they wanted for themselves, they lived according to the norms set by their families and society and got victimized by their oppressors. Despite all odds, while being cognizant of their roots and history, the women and girls of Kashmir offer a counter-discourse and counter-narrative of the ongoing conflict. They are women of resilience and courage.

The movie captures how despite the fragility of existence, the human spirit remains resilient. It is the relation between memory and identity that matters most to human beings during exile, as memory is at the core of human sensibility. Memory must be integral to every aspect of our identity, from our language to how we relate to others. Even though a lot of cultural changes took place after displacement from Kashmir but the displaced community, tries hard to keep their culture and tradition alive through memories. Their stories illustrate how fragile identity becomes when emotional turmoil overwhelms a precarious situation. (Malhotra 79).

Vidhu Vinod Chopra has been able to capture distress caused by displacement and a sense of belonging nowhere triggered by it and the continuous consciousness of being uprooted very well in the movie. The forced displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits has had an impact on the people's social organization- their kinship networks, gender relations, family organization, neighborly relationships, and community bonds. Amidst the quagmire of politics, their narratives are centered on a yearning for a home and nostalgia for a loss of a way of life. In the fight between the two nations, a rich cultural tradition was lost, a distinct ethno religious philosophy distressed, and a community was hounded out of their homeland by fundamentalists.

**References:**

Butalia, Urvashi. *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir*. Zed Books, 2002.

Bouzas, Antía Mato. "(B)Ordering and the Politics of Belonging." *St Antony's International Review*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, pp. 114–135. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/26229176](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26229176). Accessed 17 Jan. 2021.

Chopra, Vidhu Vinod, director. *Shikara*. Vinod Chopra Films. 2020.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Duschinski, Haley. “‘Survival Is Now Our Politics’: Kashmiri Hindu Community Identity and the Politics of Homeland.” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2008, pp. 41–64. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40343840](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40343840). Accessed 17 Jan. 2021.

Kaul, Nitasha. *Residue*. Rupa Publications, 2014.

Kumar, Radha. *Paradise at War: A Political History of Kashmir: A Definitive yet Accessible Study of Perhaps the Most Troubled Part of India*. Aleph Book Company, 2018.

Malhotra, Charu. “Internally Displaced People from Kashmir: Some Observations.” *Indian Anthropologist*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2007, pp. 71–80. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/41920041](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41920041). Accessed 17 Jan. 2021.

MUNSHI, SADAF. “Revisiting the Question of the Kashmiri Pandits: The Battle of the Narratives.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 35, 2013, pp. 115–116. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23528762](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23528762). Accessed 17 Jan. 2021.

Pandita, Rahul. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: The Exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits*. India Penguin, 2017.

Pifer, Ellen, “The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: Kundera’s Narration against Narration.” Milan Kundera. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003. 61-74.

Sawhney, Charu, and Nilika Mehrotra. “Displacement from Kashmir: Gendered Responses.” *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2013, pp. 83–99. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23621027](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23621027). Accessed 17 Jan. 2021.