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Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury's *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* and Edward Said's Theory of Exile: Applicational Study

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Abstract

The research paper examines Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury's heart-wrenching short story collection, *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* (2012), within the interpretative framework of Edward Said's Theory of Exile. Chowdhury presents a poignant portrayal of the human cost of political violence and displacement. The stories depict the psychological, economic, and social trauma experienced by Kashmiri Pandits during the militancy. The narratives bring to light the struggles of the exiled, the loss of their identity, and the unhealable rift between the self and true home, as pronounced by Edward Said. A few researchers have analyzed agony and trauma in K.L. Chowdhury's *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir*. However, the stories concerning Edward Said's exile concept have not been analyzed. The study offers fresh insights and a broader understanding of cross-cultural dimensions that transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries, exploring the impact of displacement on Kashmiri Pandits on physical and emotional levels. The paper analyses the inner Exile experienced by the displaced, connecting the theme of hope reflected in the stories to Said's emphasis on the enduring human capacity for hope amid Exile.

Keywords: Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir, Exile, displacement, hope

The impossibility of living even though you realize the impossibility of dying—the edge between life and death where each one rejects the other. Holding on to that limit is the first unavoidable requirement of all exiles. (Zambrano 8)

The Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano(1904-1991) explains Exile as the impossibility of living in one's homeland and finding an appropriate replacement for it.

Zambrano calls this a situation of "betweenness" and unsteadiness. She believes that orphanhood is an essential feature of Exile. She further exemplifies that Exile is like "having no place in the world, neither geographic, social, political nor ontological"(8). The exiled struggle against their lost identity, the loss of their self, which, as claimed by Edward Said, is an "unhealable rift between self and true home"(173). Exile has been one of the oldest forms of displacement in human history. Said asserts that Exile is a constrained life with a sudden shift from 'home to homelessness,' from 'secured life amidst familiar surroundings to an insecure life with temporary dwelling ' followed by imposed affiliations and loyalties. According to *the Cambridge English Dictionary*, 'exile' is a 'condition of being sent or kept away from their own country, village, etc., especially for political reasons .'In search of one's true self, the exiled consoles and reassures the self for a better tomorrow with the hope to return. Unfortunately, this initial hope eventually becomes a wait that never ends. The exiled leave a part of themselves after the forceful displacement, which makes them nostalgic about their past. The nostalgia gives rise to the hope for a better tomorrow.

The paper analyses Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury's short story collection *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir*(2012) through the lens of Edward Said's Theory of Exile, thereby transcending cultural and geographical boundaries.

An Overview of *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir*

Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury's *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* (2012) is the voice of the Kashmiri Pandit patients whom Dr Chowdhury treated in his clinic.

Born in Srinagar, Kashmir, Dr Kundan Lal Chowdhury (1941-2021) moved to Jammu after the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. With a specialization in neurology, he was an accomplished medical practitioner popular among the residents of Jammu as Dr. K L Chowdhury. Besides his profession as a doctor, his passion for writing drew him towards writing some exceptional works like short stories, travelogues, poetry, and novels. The patients he treated became his source of inspiration. Dr Chowdhury wrote many books like *Of Gods Men and Militants* (2000), *Enchanting World of Infants* (2008), *48 Hours A Travelogue in Kashmir* (2011) and *A Thousand Petalled Garland and other Poems* (2013).

Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir(2012) is an anthology of narratives depicting the psychological, economic, and social trauma the Kashmiri Pandits underwent during the militancy.

The anthology of stories was fashioned on the lives of the Kashmiri Pandit patients whom Dr Chowdhury treated in his clinic in Jammu after the exodus. Stories are based on actual events, but the writer fictionalizes them artistically. Each story written by Dr. Chowdhury talks about the traumatic events of 1990 and the homeless souls who wandered everywhere aimlessly. The book is nostalgic in many ways. Chowdhury himself was a victim of Exile who had to go through the harassment of the militants, experiencing alienation and loss of home. Finally, he settled in Jammu.

***Analysis of Faith and Frenzy* Regarding Edward Said's Theory of Exile: A Cross-Cultural Perspective**

Edward Said (1935-2003), a Palestinian-American scholar, is well-known for his concept of Exile. Said was himself an exile, having been forced to leave Palestine during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. In his works, Said has examined Exile's psychological and cultural consequences and the challenges of maintaining a sense of identity and belonging in a new and unfamiliar place. According to Said, Exile involves physical displacement from one's homeland and a psychological sense of dislocation and uprootedness. Exiles experience a profound loss as they are cut off from their roots and forced to adapt to new and often hostile environments. They feel alienated from the new surroundings and their culture, resulting in disorientation and fragmentation of their identity. The question of identity for Palestinians has always been a troubled one because, according to Said, Palestinians have been banished from Israel and have settled elsewhere around the world. In his work, *Orientalism* (1978), he clearly states that the life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. The pain of dislocation always stayed with Said his entire life like a festering wound that defies the healing capacity of worldly recognition and time. He laments in his memoir *Out of Place* (2000):

> To this day, I still feel that I am away from home, ludicrous as that may sound, and though I believe I have no illusions about the "better" life I might have had had I remained in the Arab world or lived and studied in Europe, there is still some measure of regret. On some level, this memoir is a re-enactment of the experience of departure and running out. The fact that I live in New York with a sense of provisionality despite thirty-seven years of residence here accentuates the disorientation that has accrued to me rather than the advantages. (223)

Along with Exile came the question of identity, which was a struggle for Said. As a young child, he faced embarrassment and discomfort, felt 'out of place,' and got into fights with boys at his school. He further recalls in his memoir:

> Such episodes were rare. CSAC forced me to take "Edward" (first name) more seriously as a flawed, frightened, uncertain construction than before. The overall sensation I had was of my troublesome identity as an American from which I derived no strength, only embarrassment, and discomfort...Daily at school, I felt the disparity between my life as "Edward," a false, even ideological, identity, and my home life, where my father's prosperity as an American businessman flourished after the war. (90)

Edward Said affirms that Exile is a terrible embodiment of mutilation. The experience of Exile is marked by exclusion and expulsion, which deals with the political, cultural, and social dynamics of displacement of people. In his *Reflections on Exile* (2000), Said classifies Exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human and a native place, between the self and its true home, its essential sadness can never be surmounted...The achievements of Exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (173). Exile, according to Said, is "an impairing solitude, a discontinuous state of being, a jealous state which is full of resentment and exiles are often unpleasant, eccentric and their isolation "produces the kind

of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation and community" (183).

Dr Chowdhury, through *Faith and Frenzy*, has captured different episodes from the lives of Kashmiri Pandits, who were subjected to torture and pain during the exodus. These stories give readers the details about how the Pandits were forced to leave their homes and live outside Kashmir. In one of his stories, "A Place to Die," Dr Chowdhury compared the Exile of the Pandits with a shipwreck, "the exodus scattered the Pandits like people in a shipwreck. Some drowned in the first storm of violence; others found rafts that carried them to far-off lands, yet others are still floating in the choppy seas and struggling to reach shores" (84). The characters of these stories, like Bal Kishen of "The Social Activist" or Brij Nath from "A Place to Die," are caught in the mayhem of displacement and the intolerable pain they suffer.

"A Place to Die" is the story of "Brij Nath Daftari, a sixty-two-year-old retired clerk in the Ordinance Department of the central government who was suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer. He lived in Sheetal Nath, a suburb of Srinagar, densely populated with Kashmiri Pandits and the hub of their social, cultural, and religious activities" (83). The author employs first person narrative technique for authenticity and to give it a personal and emotional touch. It is one of the most miserable and awful stories, which focuses on the issue of death rather than survival. Dr Chowdhury presents Brij Nath as his patient. He writes:

> 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 Valley was overtaken by a cataclysm that bruised and sundered relationships and drove hundreds of thousands into Exile. (83-84)

Dr Chowdhury described his condition as a "Death waiting in the shadow"(84). Brij Nath's family went from one place to another to find a place to stay in Jammu. Most of the people were reluctant to help the family by giving their room on rent as the family was with a dying man, Brij Nath. They were forced to leave and abandon the house when the landlord found out about the sickness of the dying man.

They are said to call exiled people "orphan and alienated" (173) who are homeless in their homeland and foreign lands as well. They are homeless in their homeland due to the invasion of foreign elements. In a foreign land, they find themselves in a strange and unfamiliar environment to which they cannot easily connect. Moreover, the people from the foreign land are always not that welcoming and sometimes even hostile.

Said argues that only sufferers can understand the loss that Exile inflicts on them. Said's observation that humans create Exile for other humans without showing compassion for each other applies well to Brij Nath's condition in the story. The author shows the hostile and merciless attitude of the people towards Brij Nath, who was uprooted from his homeland and later wandered everywhere in Jammu to find a peaceful abode to die.

The author also throws light on the suffering of Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu due to the extreme heat and unfavorable weather conditions. Many people died of stroke in the migrant camps. In one of the stories, Ashok, after searching for a rented room from door to door, managed to find a "bleak retreat," as Dr Chowdhury describes:

> A poorly ventilated room in a dilapidated house in the innermost recesses of the old city... It was 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, which made the room even hotter. The fan, the only means to beat the heat, blew gusts of hot air on his already febrile and famished frame. (86-87)

In Jammu, "winters merged almost imperceptibly into summers and summers into winters without much of an interlude" (214). Prithvi Nath, the protagonist of the story "Return of the Natives," grows restless. He survived eighteen long summers and winters away from his homeland in the Purkhoo Migrant Camp, Jammu. He yearns to return to his home, Kashmir, "where spring lasted a while and revived new hopes and desires, what with the thaw, the sounds, the smells and the colors that he missed so much" (214).

The desire to return to their native place, Kashmir, was a dream that all the Pandits dreamt like the other people in *Faith and Frenzy*, but for Brij Nath, living in Jammu was one of "broken memories, sloughed-off selves,... violated privacies,... extinguished futures... the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home"(Rushdie 4). According to Brij Nath, "It is better to face bullets in Kashmir than burn in the living hell here" (88). He wanted to relieve himself and the family from the pathetic living conditions, despair, extreme heat, and, most importantly, homelessness. Nobody wanted a dying man in their house, so they wanted the family to leave the rented room as soon as possible. Getting a decent room with a dying father was challenging, so Dr. Chowdhury suggested advertising their need for a rented room in a local newspaper. Dr Chowdhury scribbled over a page and wrote, "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 portrayed in the advertisement did touch one heart in Jammu of Sardar Gurbax Singh, who responded and rented out two rooms for the family at Nanak Nagar. He was a generous man who did not demand any advance for the rent. He welcomed the family instead of throwing them out. Dr Chowdhury writes about his generosity:

> 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)

Dr Chowdhury indirectly conveys through his characters that political upheavals disrupt and affect the lives of ordinary people the most, rather than the ones who are accountable for such happenings. Brij Nath is just a representative of hundreds and thousands of people with their families who suffered immensely in Kashmir, fighting for their lives and some even for their deaths. The condition was appalling, and there were very few people like Sardar Gurbax Singh who came as a savior and a ray of hope into the lives of Pandits. Singh opened the gates of love, brotherhood, compassion, and humanity for many stranded families of Kashmiri Pandits like Brij Nath's who were frantically looking out for a place to die.

"What Does A Pandit Look Like?" is a short story about the absolute isolation of the Pandits from their native land, Kashmir, which they inhabited for generations. It accounts for Mohan Lal's exodus from the Valley and his re-visit to the Valley after seventeen long years on his friend Mohammed Syed's invitation. During his visit, he was amused to see a commotion outside Syed's house. The Muslim children had assembled and were startled to see a Pandit in their locality. They shouted, "We want to see what a Pandit looks like?" (150). This was a disturbing and upsetting sight as the militants had ingrained into the minds of the young ones a negative picture of Pandits. Dr Chowdhury stated :

> Pandits were selfish, greedy, double-faced, never to be trusted. They had stories of the treachery, of how they hated Muslims, opposed Azaadi, and acted as spies and informers. Pandits slowly took shape as monsters in the minds of the new generation of Muslim children in Kashmir. (142 143)

Even Syed's daughters had this impression about the Pandits and Lal until they encountered him and his family in Jammu when the Syeds visited them. After seeing the children amused, Lal called all the onlookers, primarily children inside Syed's house, and introduced himself in the following lines:

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

It was important for Lal to convince and satisfy the children concerning his existence and appearance as a Kashmiri Pandit. The exodus of the Pandits brought the most alarming and horrible manifestation of displacement. The gap and void were created intentionally by the militants between the Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims, especially children, so that they could never unite. Lal was experiencing mixed feelings while having an encounter with his own home, which was just adjacent to Syed's house. There were mixed emotions of helplessness and a deep sense of alienation from his homeland.

The conversation between the two friends, Syed and Lal, towards the end of the story is worth quoting:

> What about the visit to your house? Don't you want to go in and tell the people there that they must vacate it soon? Mohammad Syed asked. I do not 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 unsettling response by Lal focuses on the spatio-temporal aspect of displacement and Exile. The Exile deeply affected Lal, and could not gather the courage to ask the new inhabitants to leave the house that originally belonged to him. One is reminded of *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) by Salman Rushdie, who, like Lal, was reluctant to enter his home in Bombay after leaving it for a long time. He felt nostalgic and said:

> Then I visited the house in the photograph and stood outside it, neither daring nor wishing to announce myself to its new owners. (I wanted to avoid seeing how they had ruined the interior). I was overwhelmed. (Rushdie 9)

Through Lal, Dr Chowdhury indicated the gruesome reality that the "spaces that we left behind have been filled" (154), and there is no space for the Pandits in their homeland, Kashmir. This story is "one of the major thematic concerns of all the Pandit narrative is the loss of home. The loss of home metonymically symbolizes the loss of the homeland since the Pandits had to flee their homeland" (Somjyoti 50).

While theorizing about Exile, Edward Said discusses his inner Exile concept. He calls it a psychological condition that results in an existential crisis. An individual starts questioning his own identity and becomes unsure of his existence. Life for them becomes a quintessentially exilic experience. In the stories such as "A Place to Die" and "What Does A Pandit Look Like?" Dr Chowdhury talked about this inner experience of Exile. Though all the narratives of Kashmiri Pandits dealing with the idea of Exile talk about their mental condition, when Said talks about no- special- status for the displaced people, it directly draws the attention of the readers to the characters of these two stories: Brij Nath, Ashok, and Mohan Lal. They do not require special attention from their Muslim brothers after they visit Srinagar post-exodus. They want pure love and warmth. Brij Nath, who is battling cancer, needs a place to die after struggling from the terrible exodus. Nobody wanted to rent them a place in Jammu. However, one kind man was ready to give them their "home" in Jammu so that Nath could peacefully die. The psychological struggle, instead, the psychological Exile that Brij Nath and Ashok encountered tirelessly looking for a suitable house, was horrendous. Similarly, in "What Does A Pandit Look Like?", the title itself is problematic and questionable since the identity of a Kashmiri Pandit has been questioned. The existential dilemma is heightened here. Ironically, the younger Muslim generation does not know anything about the Kashmiri Pandits, who were, once upon a time, a significant part of the land of Kashmir. The inner Exile is more significant in this story as the desire to return to Kashmir is shown through the character of Mohan Lal, who feels like a stranger in a familiar locality.

"The Social Activist" is a poignant story unfolding the life and situation of Pandit Bal Krishen, a social activist. He works for the welfare of his fellow Kashmiri Pandits, who are caught in the web of problems that all the Pandits face in the migrant camps. He was himself hand to mouth but loved working for his Pandits brothers and sisters. He meets the narrator and author, Dr Chowdhury, in Jammu on his way to his sister's home and hitchhikes. The

narrator offers to leave Bal Krishen for his desired destination. On his way, they strike up a conversation, and Bal Krishen tells a stack of lies to the narrator to acquire school fees for his children. On being enquired about his house back in Kashmir, he replies, "Our house at Devsar, Kulgam, was looted and burnt down. The small land holding fetched a paltry sum with which my father married me to a girl from a low-income 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 fabricates a story of a poor man living in the camp area of Mishriwala, Jammu, who desperately needs money for his children's education and asks the narrator if he could help the low-income family. The narrator readily agrees to help the family.

Edward Said strongly believes that the loss of homeland hurts the displaced people. It hampers the physical and mental growth of the displaced community. Due to the lack of personal space, the relationships between husbands and their wives are hindered. There is no love or intimacy, and due to the lack of income, husbands are struggling at work, and wives have nothing to cook. Bal Krishen shares his relationship with his wife with the narrator. Because he is a social activist, his wife constantly hammers him. He remarks, "My wife, too, accuses me of neglecting family responsibilities. Why do you get involved in others' work when you have so much of your own that needs to get done? She is annoyed with me, even angry, that I cannot maintain my family" (205). While talking about the high divorce rates in the migrant camps post-exodus, he says:

> There are so many divorcees walking the street looking for new partners. The courts are full of divorce cases in our community... because of the wide scatter in Exile, the severe social upheaval and economic strain we have been facing, the erosion of cultural mores, the world has changed, and so many other factors. (206)

In Edward Said's discussion of Exile, 'hope' finds frequent references. Hope is one common factor in all the stories of *Faith and Frenzy*: the hope to return to their homeland, hope for a better future and hope that things would change for the betterment of both Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims.

"Faith and Frenzy" is one of the most poignant tales of Shyam Lal, a retired official of the Public Works Department in Srinagar. The story opens up with a debate between Shyam Lal and his wife on whether or not to stay back in Kashmir in such times of crisis. They finally decided to stay back as their love for their homeland was very strong, and deep down, they hoped the situation would improve. Just then, some militants barge into his house. The militants believe that Shyam Lal's sons are their enemies and are informers of the Indian government. "Now, tell us, you old devil, where have you hidden your sons? We will spare you if you tell us the truth. Otherwise we can be very nasty"(39). Shyam Lal had already sent his sons away to Jammu so that they could escape such humiliation and suffering at the hands of militants. He experiences both physical and mental pain.

Through the story "Return of the Natives," Chowdhury showed that Pandits and Muslims, however differently, might dress or speak, yet their hearts are connected. Some

handful of militants and their ruthless and outrageous attitude towards the Pandits does not define the attitude of the entire Muslim community. The violence and politics were played by a handful of militants who were also anti-nationalists, and they caused the exodus of the Pandits, not the entire Muslim community. The warmth and love of the Muslim villagers towards their Pandit friend, Prithvi Nath, and his wife show respect, brotherhood, and, most importantly, humanity in their community. They valued them and considered them as a part of their Kashmiri community. They were not outsiders to them. Everybody in the village helped them to relocate themselves in the village, provided food supplies to them, and helped them in restoring their farmlands. They got the love they wanted and a place to die happily: their homeland, Kashmir.

Conclusion

Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir captures the experience of Exile and the resilience of those compelled to rebuild their lives in new, unfamiliar environments. The stories present the excruciating pain, struggle, and pathos that the exodus caused on the Kashmiri Pandits. The disease, hunger, and struggle of broken Pandit families for survival create the most painful stories with themes such as shock, loss of loved ones, homelessness, alienation, and insecurity. With so much distress and unpleasantness, Edward Said feels that exiled souls become broken souls, constantly searching for and restoring their identity. The fact that their lives are broken becomes an urgent need to refurbish their fragmented lives. Hence, Said believes that the fragmented lives of the exiled people result in hostility towards outsiders to mend their own lives,

The stories of Kashmiri Pandits remain relevant, recounting not only the endured turmoil but also emphasizing the preservation of their rich cultural underpinnings. Edward Said's theory of Exile, intertwined with his life, is notable for its connection with life. The cross-fertilization of exile narratives of Kashmiri Pandit writer and Edward Said's exile perspective shows that the wounds of the Kashmiri Pandits are the wounds of the Palestinians and vice versa. The cross-cultural analysis takes Dr K.L. Chowdhury's short stories from the local(community)level to a global level, opening new research opportunities in literature and life.

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