

**Memory as Resistance: The Politics of Dispossession and Trauma in
Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots***

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Abstract

After the development of contemporary trauma theory in USA during the early 1990s, the critical question of representing trauma in literature has received widespread attention. The present study attempts to explore how personal and collective trauma is represented in a poignant memoir on the persecution, exodus, and exile of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland in Kashmir. Based on Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, this study endeavors to analyze how trauma is represented not only through temporal and spatial descriptions but also through characters and settings in the text. The proposed study seeks to understand the ways in which memory functions to improve the testimonial quality of the narrative. The study also examines the manner in which physical and mental trauma is represented through various literary tools and narrative strategies. By moving away from the traditional trauma theory that centralizes pathological fragmentation, this study adopts a pluralistic approach to explore the variabilities of traumatic representation in a literary text. Unlike the conventional psychological model, the new pluralistic approach emphasizes the social and cultural significance of trauma.

Keywords: Displacement, Memory, Trauma, Kashmiri Pandits, Representation.

In the 1990s, trauma studies first emerged in literary theory and criticism as a significant field that relies heavily on Freudian concepts to advance a model of trauma. The era had also witnessed a surge in scholarly researches examining the notion of trauma and its function in literature and society, propounded by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. This first wave of criticism propagated the notion of trauma as an unrepresentable event that exposed the inherent incongruities existing in both language and experience. For instance, in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996), trauma is regarded as an extreme experience that fragments the consciousness, and this pathological fragmentation prevents the victim from direct linguistic representation. Michelle Balaev summarizes the major doctrines of the Caruthian trauma model in the following words:

In the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth, trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. The model draws attention to the severity of suffering by suggesting that the traumatic experience irrevocably damages the psyche. Trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation... The critical emphasis on trauma's unspeakability rests on the claim that extreme experience fractures both language and consciousness, causing lasting damage and demanding unique narrative expressions. The event is absent in normal consciousness but preserved just beyond the limits of understanding in a timeless, wordless state and continues to inflict pain on the psyche. Trauma's strange absence yet ghostlike presence in consciousness, its lack of normal integration into memory and narration casts a shadow that indirectly points toward trauma's meaning and the truth of the past. (Balaev 363)

As a reaction against the traditional model of trauma propounded by theorists like Cathy Caruth, criticism developed a pluralistic approach that directly challenges the notion of trauma as 'unrepresentable' and 'unspeakable' in a literary text. The critics in this vein include Michelle Balaev, Naomi Mandel, Ann Cvetkovich, Greg Forter, and Amy Hungerford. The 'unspeakable' trope in the traditional model of trauma is contested by the pluralistic model, which aims to comprehend not only the structural aspects of trauma but also its cultural aspects and the variability of narrative representations. "By moving away from a position that centralizes pathological fragmentation, the pluralistic model suggests that traumatic experience uncovers new relationships between experience, language, and knowledge that detail the social significance of trauma" (Balaev 366). This approach to examining trauma draws more emphasis on the variety of traumatic representations. As per this approach in literary trauma theory, the trauma of catastrophic events can be represented and narrated in a literary text through formal strategies that depict "the ethical tension of portraying the oppression from, and resistance to, hegemonic power in a representational order that attempts to silence the subject" (368). As Greg Forter rightly points out, "the 'unrepresentable' character of trauma is thus due not to its being 'originary' and hence, beyond history and representation. Rather, it concerns the enforced rupture with pre-colonial pasts and the prohibitions against remembrance enforced by particular regimes of power" (Forter 77).

Kashmiri Pandits have become 'refugees in their own country' after their mass exodus from Kashmir Valley in the early 1990s. For Pandits, displacement and their subsequent life in exile had created uncertainty at social, cultural and psychological dimensions of their life. Most of them did not return to the Valley for resettlement due to various unfavorable socio-political circumstances thereby leading a life of permanent exile. They were forced to lead a life of dependence by losing their self-respect, dignity and standard of living. *On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir* (2017), Ankur Datta describes the inability of Pandits to emotionally adjust with their loss even after two decades of their displacement:

The issue of place and resettlement and the loss of material possessions, assets, and livelihoods along with the loss of socio-economic and political status and self-respect figures in any discussion with the Pandits...What complicates the scene is the fact that more than two decades have passed since their displacement. Many Kashmiri Pandits have rebuilt their lives with varying degrees of success. Yet the sense of loss with displacement persists across generations. There is an inability to make a secure place and home in spite of settlement in a physical sense. (21)

Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* is a powerful and poignant memoir that narrates the tragic story of mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland and their life after exodus. Pandita was in his adolescent years when his family was forced to leave their ancestral home in Kashmir Valley. In his memoir, he has written a deeply personal story of homelessness, both physical and mental. The paper closely analyses this text as a deeply personal trauma narrative through the method of detailed textual analysis. The question central to this analysis is how much of trauma can be represented in the personal narrative of a victim and how can it be represented effectively. The author has explored the tool of memory to unfold trauma in the lives of displaced Kashmiri Pandits both at personal and collective levels. The author who himself is a victim of forced displacement reports all that sequence of experiences associated with exodus in such a way that this narrative becomes a therapy to overcome the effects of physical and mental trauma. As Susan Martin rightly points out:

Forced migration often involves trauma, dislocation and abrupt change in life. At a minimum, the displaced may face emotional problems and difficulties in adjustment resulting from loss of family and community support. More serious mental health problems may arise from torture and sexual abuse prior to or after the flight. (65)

Though Indian state has officially categorized the displaced Kashmiri Pandit as 'migrants', they can be sociologically described as IDPs i.e. internally displaced persons. Robert Cohen and Francis M. Deng in *Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement* (1998) associates the predicament of internally displaced with that of refugees crossing international borders. According to them, they are refugees in their own nation where their basic civil rights and human rights are consistently violated (35). Moreover, displacement is not merely a geographical dislocation but a complete breakdown of social, cultural, religious and emotional bondage shared at a community level. It is near to impossibility for a displaced person to mentally integrate with his new surroundings even after many decades of migration. Their memories of the past haunt them in such a way that the strong feeling of alienation becomes an everyday reality. Mostly, they suffer from a mental health condition termed Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is the direct outcome

of terrifying traumatic events that they witnessed during the exodus. Its symptoms include recurring memories and dreams about traumatic incidents during the exodus, involuntarily re-experiencing such events as if it is happening in the present through flashback mode of memory, recurrent disturbing nightmares about such events etc.

Memory in literature is the formal written expression of significant past embedded in the human psyche. It hails from the process of thought shaped by the experiences of historical past. As every sensation in life is molded by thoughts and memories, every literary text is the product of human perceptions which are formed in thoughts and shaped in memories. Memory functions at multiple levels of a literary text, especially in the modern world of individual and collective identity. It acts as a means to represent the past, as in testimonies, where literature concurs with history to reveal what is systematically concealed from the public domain by the official historiography. Moreover, it functions as way to reconstruct both individual and collective cultural identity which had been lost in the flow of time. Memory serves as a literary theme of profound importance from time immemorial where oral musings of primitive men were the only source of aesthetic representations. Even in the earliest written epic works, memory had been employed as a central device of literary imagination. For instance, in Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the author establishes the cultural identity of ancient Greece through blending fictional elements with the recordings of heroic men about heroic events of ancient past. In addition to impart authenticity to these works, it also provides a sense of historical memory to works that are fictitious in nature. The "historical memory", often expressed as "collective memory", is the way in which social group and communities reclaim their social, political and cultural identities through narratives about historic events of great significance. These historical memories are the basis in which the present reclaims the social and political identities of past which has been suppressed, repressed and isolated by the hegemonic forces of oppression.

A monumental work of literature that contributed to the evolution of memory is Marcel Proust's autobiographical novel *Remembrance of Things Past*. This early twentieth century work had employed memory as an effective tool of narration which begins with the famous madeleine episode in the first volume of the novel where the narrator is rapidly immersed in to the memories of his childhood through tasting a small cake (madeleine) along with tea. Evoked by the unique taste of the cake, the narrator journeys to his own mental landscape where sequence of events from the past unfolds in the form of a story. This work has tremendously impacted the use of memory in the process of narration in order to establish textual authenticity for the exploration of the self and the world. The modern writers have also closely followed Proust's technique of narration in the process of constructing memory-oriented narratives. Pandita also begins his memoir with the memory of an old man's death in the refugee camp in Jammu, 1990. "They found the old man dead in his torn tent, with a pack of chilled milk pressed against his right cheek. It was our first June in exile, and the heat felt like a blow in the back of the head" (Pandita 1). Through beginning his narration with the memory of an old man's corpse in a refugee camp,

the author sets the tone of the entire narrative which is undoubtedly of desolation, despair and hopelessness. As he puts it, “At fourteen we knew we were refugees, but we had no idea what family meant. And I don’t think we realized then that we would never have a home again” (4). Pandita was just fourteen when he was forced to be a refugee in his own country. However, the memories were so intense and intrusive in such a way that it traumatizes his future psyche with more intensity than at the moment in which he witnessed it as an adolescent. Unlike the voluntary migration of a group from one geographical region to the other, the forced displacement of Pandit community from their homeland was basically inhuman, horrendous and unfair, especially in the modern world of liberal democracy. Their displacement was both geographical and psychological. It was geographical since it involved the physical dislocation from their homeland to other areas as refugees. On the other hand, it was psychological as it involved the shift of mental feelings, emotions, longings and sentiments from its original realm to an unknown as well as undecipherable space. Moreover, their displacement becomes a state of permanent exile when they cannot return to their homeland mostly due to social, political and communal circumstances. Pandita recognizes their state of exile when he observes:

Like most migrants, I had also come to Delhi in search of a better life, to regain some of what my family had lost during the exodus from the Kashmir Valley. But there was a difference between the other migrants and me. On festivals, and on family functions, or when they were dying, they knew they could go back to where they had come from. I couldn’t do that. I knew I was in permanent exile. I could own a house in this city, or any other part of the world, but not in the Kashmir Valley where my family came from. (Pandita 7)

The memoir has an authentic testimonial quality where the narrator encapsulates both personal and collective memory. Through narrating the individual memory of various characters including the narrator himself, Pandita recreates a dark episode in the history of humanity. Through both voluntary and involuntary memory, these characters get a cognitive map through which they comprehend who they are, why they are here, and where they are up to. These individual memories of events achieve a collective spirit so that the voice of the voiceless gets due recognition. This unique function of memory is clearly evident in the narrative pattern of the work. For instance, the critical questions on home, homelessness, trauma and loss of identity of the exiled have been suggested effectively by the narrator when he discusses the “home story” of Ma:

The home story was a statement that Ma had got into the habit of telling anyone who would listen. It didn’t matter to her whether they cared or not. It had become a part of herself, entrenched like a precious stone in the mosaic of her identity.

By the time her voice had failed her in 2004, I noticed that she had started repeating this statement much too often... It was the only thing that reminded her of who she was, more than the occasional glances she would steal at the mirror when no one else was looking.

‘Our home in Kashmir had twenty-two rooms.’ (Pandita 10)

The text directly suggests the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among the victims of exodus including the narrator. For instance, the PTSD i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder like symptoms are evident when the narrator records his physical and psychological responses to slogans seeking the freedom of Kashmir, “The noise beats hard on my chest, like a drumbeat gone berserk. My head feels like an inferno, and a cold sweat traverse down my back” (Pandita 8). Through writing out the trauma, the narrator himself is undergoing a therapeutic treatment of mental recuperation. As Ann Kaplan explains in her *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, “the authors find varying strategies through which to communicate what the traumatic events mean to them emotionally” (155). More than an intense emotional response, the narrator’s response is hysterical as he dissociates himself from reality. Rahul Pandita diligently records his own psychological responses as an adolescent boy on the crucial day on January 19, 1990- a day in which Kashmiri Pandit exodus began. As he narrates: “*I am in a deep slumber. I can hear strange noises. Fear grips me. All is not well. Everything is going to change. I see shadows of men slithering along our compound wall. And when they jump inside. One by one. So many of them*” (Pandita 75). Pandita repeatedly compares their tragedy with that of Jews in Nazi Germany during World War II through mentioning Auschwitz- the distressing symbol of Jewish genocide. The atmosphere of bloodshed and fear associated with the exodus had tortured them emotionally there by leading to an extreme condition of psychological trauma. The narrator provides a comprehensive view on the plight of women and their victimization to sexual and emotional abuse. The narrator provides a poignant image of Pandit women on their way to Jammu in search of safety:

Women had been herded like cattle into the backs of trucks... In one of the trucks, a woman lifted the tarpaulin sheet covering the back and peered outside. There was nothing peculiar about her except the blankness in her eyes. They were like a void that sucked you in. Years later, I saw a picture of a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz. When I saw his eyes, my mind was immediately transported to that day, and I was reminded of the look in that woman’s eyes. (Pandita 98)

Trauma memories are intrusively involuntary where an individual re-experience suppressed images of violence and bloodshed as it happens in the present moment. If it is experienced as involuntary memories and flashbacks during the daytime, it is re-experienced as haunting nightmares while asleep. These haunting memories exist as a continuum through recurring re-experiences even after knowing

that it happened in the past. Such re-experiences are predominantly sensory in nature where the individual experience the pain as it was experienced in the past. This incongruity to differentiate between real and unreal is what characterizes post-traumatic stress disorder in an individual who is suffering from trauma. Moreover, this sensory aspect of trauma can further aggravate the mental distress and despair of the victim to new heights. At times, traumatic memory functions in a fragmented manner where the victim is powerless to verbally recount all the experiences in the form of a narrative. But such memories are startingly vivid but fragmented in the psyche of the victim. Moreover, such memories have a revolutionary role in remembering what is forgotten. As the narrator puts it, "I spoke to him about how I understood why he did not want to talk about it, but how important it was to talk about it. I quoted Milan Kundera: *The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting*" (Pandita 223).

In conclusion, it is clear that the memory and trauma of displacement in Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, is an evocation of tragic sufferings that Kashmiri Pandits endured as a community which got forcefully displaced from their homeland. From a South Asian point of view, it invites the readers to develop an understanding of trauma among forcefully displaced communities. As psychology provides a unique view of individual consciousness, literature offers its own. Even though they differ in their methodology, both psychology and literature deals with the art of interpretation. As Sigmund Freud rightly points out, "psychoanalysis is above all an art of interpretation" (Freud 22). Rahul Pandita's memoir is an artistic interpretation of trauma in the consciousness of a displaced community and it demonstrates the terrible experiences that are disregarded or hidden from the public view. It offers voice to the voiceless and cautions the readers against collective amnesia that selectively forgets certain tragedies of the past.

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