



ETHNIC CLEANSING, EXODUS AND HOMELESSNESS: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF RAHUL PANDITA'S OUR MOON HAS BLOOD CLOTS

Krishnanand A

Research Scholar, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Madurai
Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamilnadu

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The tale of the Kashmiri Pandits proves almost like that of dodos, who fell prey to the European settlers in Mauritius. Kashmiri Pandits, otherwise termed Kashmiri Brahmins, largely lovers of peace and nonviolence, form the native minority Brahmin community of the Kashmir Valley. The pristine and placid nature of their homeland with its lush green, snowy environs had long been lost. Once owned orchard of apples, walnuts and apricots, the Pandits of the valley have been transformed to almost nomads. The multiple forms of ineffable atrocities levelled against the community range right from the fourteenth century, under the reign of Sultan Sikandar, to the contemporary militant sponsored ethnical cleansing. However, with much endurance and fortitude, the Pandits bore the brutal onslaught on themselves at the hands of militant terrorism and religious extremism. With almost nobody to raise their voice and stand with them, they had the only alternative of meeting horrid death, or moving to elsewhere. My paper is an earnest endeavour to analyse the carnage, exodus, exile and related issues of the members of the Kashmir Pandit community, with reference to Rahul Pandita's 2013 book, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*. It would be better to commence with some words about the Pandit community.

To the Pandits, the valley of Kashmir is 'Saradapeeth' - the abode of the Goddess of learning and fine arts. They had been great scholars, educators, and contributors to various disciplines as literature, history, philosophy and aesthetics. Some of the examples would include the great Kashmiri Pandit scholars as Kalhana who wrote the grand historical treatise *Rajatarangini*; Abhinavagupta who authored more than thirty-five works like *Tantraloka* - a thorough study of Kashmiri Shaivism - and *Abhinavabharti*, a masterly commentary on the *Natyasastra*; Kshendra whose *Brhatkathamajari* is a collection of tales representing the lost tradition of the genre of 'brahmkatha' or 'big story.' Also, it was in Kashmir that Buddhist scriptures were written in Sanskrit for the first time. Kumarajiva, a Buddhist monk and son of a Kashmiri Pandit, had translated the noteworthy Buddhist philosophical text in Sanskrit, *Lotus Sutra* into Chinese in 406 AD.

Rahul Pandita has been recognized a prominent journalist and writer, born in 1974 to a Kashmiri Pandit family in Srinagar. He was one of the founding members of the highly popular *Open Magazine*, and had worked in *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*. Besides *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, Pandita also penned many books, including the bestselling *Hello, Bastar: The Untold Story of India's Maoist Movement*. He is the co-author of the widely acclaimed *The Absent State*. Extensively, he has reported from war zones in Sri Lanka and Iraq, and also from those in Kashmir and Bastar. He received the International Red Cross Award for conflict reporting in 2010. Hence, it is evident that the author is one who has the credibility and authenticity, especially in his writings.

Our Moon Has Blood Clots is as an undismayed, autobiographical account that vents out the intensely problematic, highly tragic and extremely relegated existence of the Pandits. The book could be labelled a memoir, a piece of non-fiction novel. The title of the book seems to have been inspired by one poem by Pablo Neruda, "Oh, My Lost City." Rahul Pandita was just fourteen when he, with his family members, was forced to leave their home in Srinagar in 1990. Moreover, the author's own nephew, Ravi, whom he admired the most in his teenage, was shot dead by the terrorists. The book, at least in person, has been dedicated to Ravi. The author delineates the brutal genocide meted out to the Kashmiri Pandits at the hands of religious militancy and bigotry. They were to spend the rest of their lives in exile in their own nation. A sort of internal migration takes place. By 1991, nearly 350,000 Pandits have escaped from the valley and taken exodus to Jammu, Delhi, and elsewhere. The term "exodus" "implies going out", a mass departure of people from one place to another. It actually designated the departure of Israelites from Egypt in *The Bible*. The book by Rahul Pandita poignantly touches upon the aspects of leaving and living, refugees, homelessness, trauma, marginalization, memory, nostalgia and history. The eminent Indian historian and scholar, Ramachandra Guha reads the book as one powerful and moving that sheds light onto one of the most tragic conflicts in the modern world. The book has been split into five parts.

The book opens with a heart-rending description of the death of an old Kashmiri Pandit, Triloki Nath, in a torn, refugee tent in 1990 Jammu. He is cremated next to the canal in Jammu. An onlooker remarks, "back home, the drain next to the old man's house was bigger than the canal" (1. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). Also, Trilokhi Nath's Stewart Warner radio was later found switched on which played an old Hindi song:

Aadmi musafir hai

Aata hai, jaata hai
Man is a traveller

He comes, he goes (1, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*).

The fate of Triloki Nath encapsulates the same of every Kashmiri Pandit. Rahul Pandita, the author, has superbly launched his descriptive skills here. Also, the writer mentions his own status of being in exile, living along with his family in a small, cramped, damp hotel room: "Ours was a family of Kashmiri Pandits, and we had fled from Srinagar... We had been forced to leave the land where our ancestors had lived for thousands of years" (2, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*).

Another touching scene Pandita delineates is that of his account of the settlement camp in Jammu: "When I went there for the first time, I remember being confronted with the turgid smell of despair emanating from the people who waited for their turns outside latrines, or taps" (2, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). The commotion a relief van creates in the crowd of exiles has also been narrated. Such a van supplies essential commodities as kerosene, biscuits, milk powder, rice and vegetables. Often, the queue would be much longer than the items for supply turned insufficient. One day, for instance, tomatoes were distributed; initially, a few tomatoes were given to those who were at the front of the queue, then, only three ones had begun to be given away, lastly, it was reduced to one single tomato per person. Here, an old woman shouts: "Do we have to fight over a few tomatoes now?" (3, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*).

"I have loved justice and hated iniquity: therefore, I die in exile" (49, *Shepherd of Souls: The Virtuous Life of Saint Anthony Pucci*), uttered Pope Gregory VII as his last words. The condition of being in exile for the Kashmiri Pandits has its intensity increasing over the years. Rahul Pandita candidly shares his own experience of being in exile and the sort of psychological alienation he feels in Delhi:

...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 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 (7, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*).

By 2004, the author's mother lost her voice completely. Pandita lovingly calls her 'Ma.' She had the habit of telling anyone who would listen, her most favourite dictum, "Our home in Kashmir had twenty-two rooms" (10, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). The habit of repeating the statement grew as she moved towards her loss of voice. Though, factually, the maxim was right, at first, the author could not make out the significance and potentiality of that utterance. But later he realizes how much that particular statement meant to Ma- the only stuff that reminded her of who she was. It might also be an escape from her contemporary plight to her own good old days.

The book gives vivid descriptions of the author's home. There was a rich kitchen garden, consisting of brinjals, bottle gourd, collard greens, cucumber, radish, chillies, knoll-khol and mountain mint. There was also an apple tree and an apricot tree. Those extravagant days, however, have gone. The author's father had built the house next to his brother in law's. In fact, Rahul Pandita's maternal grandfather, 'Tathya,' and grandmother, 'Dedda,' had fled from Baramullah in Noth Kashmir to Srinagar back in 1947, because of the dreadful and grisly invasion of the Pathans. Ma, as a toddler, "had been carried by her 10-year-old brother on his back for miles to safety" (21, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). So, evidently, the exodus of Rahul Pandit's family extends to decades; it is a matter of three generations.

Pandita's parents had been government employees. The writer's father worked with the irrigation department, and Ma served in the health department. The entire Provident Fund of the father had exhausted by the time he started constructing the house. Ma, hence, had to hand over all her jewellery to father to help him finance the construction. The house thus built was in one of the new suburbs of Srinagar. Also, the author was born a year later when his parents moved to the new house.

The anxiety and the sense of insecurity among the Pandits aggravated by the Delhi anti-Sikh riots soon after Mrs. Gandhi was shot dead. From the *Indian Express* the members of the Pandita family learnt the shocking details of how hundreds of innocent people were murdered for no fault of their own. The author clearly remembers the words of one of his uncles, "One day, something similar will happen here, to us" (43, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). Ravi, the nephew of Rahul Pandita, was working as a professor of Botany in a college in Gool, Udampur. When Ravi was pursuing his M. Phil, he would take the ten-year-old Rahul to the Shalimar Garden, Pari Mahal and Nehru Park, riding his Yamaha motorbike, on a holiday. The author delineates the intimate bond of fraternity that they shared. He actually admired Ravi as a brother with a heroic cult. In 1993 Ravi got married to Asha, a well-educated girl, a gold medalist in Zoology. A year later Shubham, their child was born into the family. But destiny was cruel to them. In 1997, Ravi was looking for a transfer to Jammu to be safe and to have more time with his family who already shifted there; "I am trying to be transferred to Jammu. Shubham is growing- he needs me" (149, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*), he had told Rahul. On his way from Jammu to Gool, along with his two Pandit colleagues, on board a bus, a group of armed men stops the vehicle. The men had specific information about the three Pandits in the bus. Ravi and his friends were asked to step out

of the bus, and gunned down. The tragic incident hit the author like a thunderbolt, whose impact is to continue his whole life. The description of the incident cuts deep into the heart of the reader, a real-life situation that a Pandit family encountered. Many other incidents narrated in the book are far more gruesome and fuller of terror.

The violence meted out to Kashmiri Pandit women would be incommunicable. They have been subjected to gang rapes and physical and mental violations. On 6 June 1990, Girija Tickoo, a 28-year-old lady, working as a laboratory assistant in a government school, was abducted and gang raped. More barbaric was that the hooligans took her to a saw mill and cut her alive on a mechanical saw. At least another score of such incidents is described in the book. All of those would shake the very soul of humanity. However, space restriction hinders one from referring to all those monstrous incidents. What happened in a nutshell is that the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandit population in the valley led to a fall to a below 5% by 1982, which was around 15% by 1942.

The book towards its end, has an account of Rahul Pandita, the author, making a final visit to his home in Srinagar that was forced to leave more than twenty years back. He visits it along with his two friends. Now, the house is occupied by another family. Similar is the case of almost every Kashmiri Pandit, their homes have been illegally snatched away by people whom they do not know either. Like an alien, Pandita has to knock at the door of his own home. The passage is extremely poignant and moving that one would well up tears in one's eyes. The writer assures the new occupant that he has not come there for a fight or vengeance, but to have a glance over the premises and rooms, and other paraphernalia that lay there. The man allows Pandita and is given a cup of tea, while the latter moves to the rooms and the corridor and the stairs that he once loved deeply. A statement by the occupant creates emotional stirs in the mind of the writer, but he cleverly manages to hide those ones, "The house was in very bad condition...When we shifted the walls were crumbling; we had to spend a lot of money on renovation" (216, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*).

The author also raises some grave questions about the menacing silence and neglect over the exodus and carnage of the Pandit Community on the part of the media and members of the nation's intelligentsia, "Another problem is the apathy of the media and a majority of India's intellectual class who refuse to even acknowledge the sufferings of the Pandits. No campaigns were ever run for us" (220, *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*). Hence, the book vehemently attempts at raising questions about a civilized, secular and democratic society that celebrates lofty ideals and clichés, but fails to safeguard its own victimized sections. This becomes more visible in the contemporary milieu of the ongoing hullabaloo over the developing 'intolerance' in the country.

References:

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2. Rookey, Peter M. *Shepherd of Souls: The Virtuous Life of Saint Anthony Pucci*. Illinois: C M J Marian Publishers, 2003.