

Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits: A Study of the Agonies in K. L. Chowdhury's Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir

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Abstract: In the selected short stories from Dr. K L Chowdhury's *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir*, the present research paper aims to explore the experience of exile, psychological upheaval, familial struggles, and alienation of individuals and communities. The stories look at how the author deals with feelings of loss, terror, horror, alienation, and homelessness that ordinary Kashmiri Pandits have experienced as a result of the armed conflict in Kashmir and their subsequent exile from the valley. The vicissitudes of exile posed a serious threat to the self-respect and dignity of Kashmiri Pandits, who found themselves in unexpected and miserable situations.

Keywords: Alienation, Displacement, Exile, Homelessness, Psychological, Upheaval, Rootlessness.

Alienation is the most basic form of rootlessness, and it has been extensively studied in psychology, sociology, literature, and philosophy. Alienation is a major theme in the modern human condition. It's only natural that such a ubiquitous phenomenon as alienation has left such

a lasting impression on contemporary literature. In both intrinsic and extrinsic terms, alienation emerges as a natural consequence of the existential predicament. In modern literature, the theme of alienation has been addressed repeatedly and uncompromisingly. Alienation has been addressed in existentialist literature in various forms. Therefore, an Indo-English literature could not remain unaffected by it for historical and socio-cultural reasons. *Faith and Frenzy: Short Stories from Kashmir* is a collection of narratives depicting the social, economic, and psychic morbidity that Kashmiri Pandits went through during the times of armed struggle in Kashmir. It draws upon the nostalgic pull for the homeland and also the predicament, harassment, sense of loss, as well as alienation, which the Pandits experienced after they left Kashmir and settled in different parts of India. Chowdhury is a displaced Kashmiri Pandit living in exile in Jammu and is a well-known physician in the field of neurology. Besides his busy life as a doctor, Chowdhury writes novels, short stories, poetry, and travelogues. Though he lives 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 birthplace, i.e., Kashmir, and it is this psychological relationship that ignites the creative zeal in others' minds to give expression through writing. Despite his secure settlement outside the Kashmir, Chowdhury does not remain unaware of the shock that the exodus has caused to the multitude of Kashmiri Pandits. The emotional tug-of-war between the lost past and the precarious present becomes a delicate balance to be maintained, and only a few creative individuals attempt to do so. Writing becomes a safe haven for the lost home, which is recreated through the combination of words on paper in such cases. Following the separatist upheaval of the late 1980s, the exodus from Kashmir shattered Kashmiri Pandits' socio-cultural

and economic structures, scattering and floating aimlessly in search of modes of minimum survival.

The stories about Kashmiri people who were driven out of their homes and into other parts of the country are written in a very descriptive style. “The exodus scattered the Pandits like people in a shipwreck,” Chowdhury explains, comparing the exodus to a shipwreck. He continues, “Some drowned in the first wave of violence; others discovered rafts that carried them too far away from land; and still others are stranded in the choppy seas, unable to reach shore.” (84). Whether it’s Brij Nath from “A Place to Die” or Bal Krishen from “The Social Activist,” all of these characters are caught up in a whirlwind of displacement and experience the unbearable pangs of exile. The search for identity by a dispossessed person is a common theme in Chowdhury’s stories. Today, man fails to recognise the meaning of life and the significance of his existence in a hostile world. Edmund Fuller aptly writes, “Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine, and ruin in our time but also from inner problems, a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in his way of life.” This meaninglessness is apparent in the Pandits who are forced to leave their homes despite living most of their lives there.

In the story “A Place to Die,” Brij Nath Daftari, a 62-year-old retired clerk from the Central Government’s Ordinance Department, has been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. He has to deal with the ugly side of the world and this old cancer patient is forced to flee to an alien place which only deteriorates his ailing body. The first-person account lends realism to the stories and confirms the accuracy of the incidents described. It is the most tragic of the stories in this collection, as it is the only one that deals with death rather than survival, well-being, or insecurity. Chowdhury identifies Brij Nath as a person he knew in his real life:

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 describes as “Death waiting in the shadow,” Brij Nath and his family run from pillar to post to find a roof over their head and a place to die in Jammu. Most of the landlords are unwilling to rent even a single room to his family with a dying man. The family is forced to vacate one house after the other. According to Keniston, “most usages of alienation share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed that is natural, desirable, or good, has been lost” (6). A person who suffers from alienation, according to thinkers like Kenston, experiences the disintegration of human relationships. This is evident when the Jummities force migrants to leave their homes simply because they cannot afford to pay a high rent. Because of the constant influx of refugees, the rents on housing in Jammu skyrocketed, forcing most Pandits to live in makeshift tents provided by the government or in stables, cellars, and stores. Furthermore, the scorching heat of Jammu adds to the emotional turmoil of Pandits who are forced to flee the pleasant climes of Kashmir. Ashok, Brij Nath’s son, manages to find another rented accommodation in the old Jammu city, something which Chowdhury describes as “bleak retreat.” The new accommodation is:

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 remains prominent for the characters of *Faith and Frenzy* but for Brij Nath, life in Jammu is, besides being a search for a place to die, a broken memory, broken-self, violated privacies and extinguished futures.

The landlords of the rented accommodations force the families to vacate the houses as soon as possible because they do not want the strangers to die in their houses. There is no option left for Chowdhury who floats the idea of an advertisement in a daily local newspaper asking for accommodation. The pathos hits the ceiling when Chowdhury scribbles the advertisement which reads as follows:

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 stories from this collection are the narratives directly related to the uneasy experiences of Kashmiri Pandits both in and out of Kashmir during the separatist uprising. However, the shock and infliction that the armed struggle unleashed has been aptly negotiated by Chowdhury. *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. The stories under consideration depict the pathos,

excruciating pain, and struggle that Kashmiri Pandits have experienced as a result of the exodus. The stories' creative matrix is broken families, hunger, disease, and the struggle for simple survival, interspersed with the thematic concerns of loss, shock, alienation, homelessness, and insecurity. In many works of Indo-English fiction, alienation is a central theme and recurring motif. The protagonists are outcasts in their society due to personal flaws or societal evils. Chowdhury skillfully depicts the plight of exiled Pandits and expresses compassion for them.

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