"Days of Parting": A Testimony to Trauma

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Abstract

Focusing on the rendition of the pathetic human conditions as is reflected in Indian English literature, this paper aims to study the 'Kashmir Holocaust.' Through the lens of trauma theory, this paper studies the personal essay by Arvind Gigoo, titled "Days of Parting," taken from the collection of memoirs, *A Long Dream of Home*. Using theoretical perspectives proposed in Dori Laub's "Truth and Testimony – The Process and the Struggle," in which he discusses three distinct levels of 'witnessing,' the paper will explore the relevance of memory, witness, and testimony intertwined in this memoir, concluding that trauma never ends for a survivor. The ideas of Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler on witness and memory are also used in the paper to understand the effect of trauma on Kashmiris.

Keywords: - Kashmir Literature, Trauma Studies, Days of Parting, Dori Laub, Witnessing

Introduction

Kashmiri fiction(s) embark on the reality of the social life in Kashmir. Hence, they stand as testimonies to the trauma experienced by the Kashmiri natives. However, to understand it from a firsthand experience is to witness the depth of those traumatic experiences. One must go through the non-fiction to experience the same. Hence, this paper focuses on the testimony expressed in the selected memoir as an attempt to witness the trauma of Kashmiris. It aims to understand the process of memorizing, witnessing and giving of testimony. The collective trauma of the common folk in Kashmir, as expressed in the memoir, can be considered as a national trauma too.

Theoretical framework and methodology

The study delimits itself to analyse the memoir by the Kashmiri writer Arvind Gigoo, titled "Days of Parting," which falls under Indian Writing in English. The theoretical framework adopted is the idea proposed by an Israeli-American psychiatrist, Dori Laub, in his work "Truth and Testimony – The Process and the Struggle."

Laub considers the possibility of three levels of witnessing: the 'autobiographical awareness,' the interviewer point of view, and 'witnessing itself being witnessed.' This approach leads to an estimation of the horror of the event and its conversion into a shared responsibility. According to Dori Laub, the first level of witnessing arises from 'an autobiographical awareness.' Vivid memories of events along with the exact feelings and thoughts that they provoked constitute this level of witnessing. The second one is the experience as an interviewer, who relives and re-experiences the event along with the survivor as the latter explains his traumatic past. When Gigoo listens to the people around him on the events that he has not witnessed, he steps down to the second level of witnessing. The third one is 'witnessing itself being witnessed,' seeking the truth, comparing it with the present to see the unbelievable past.

Laub elaborates on the importance of personal essays and diaries since they are testimonies of those who have undergone a tragic experience, the trauma of which remains. He dwells on the ideas of 'the imperative' and 'the impossibility' to tell, the process and the struggle involved in a testimonial narrative. In some instances, one can find a historical gap as voices are raised much after the event. And then, with the delayed revelation, the world even doubts the possibility of the event. Thus, the probability of witnessing itself is suspected. However, a generation of young who can associate with, but not assimilate the traumatic events, questions this order to claim the traumatic past. Laub suggests that the loop of trauma is endless even after narrating the testimony. He says, ". . . the act of bearing witness at the same time makes and breaks a promise . . ." (Laub 73). The process of finding the truth through testimony reveals the reality of the past, but never allows it to assimilate with the present, as the past cannot be restored. In the end, it is an assurance from the listener or the reader that the survivor or the witness is not alone in his journey back from the point of trauma, which helps the survivor to move on.

Reading "Days of Parting" as a testimony

A Long Dream of Home is a collection of personal essays exclusively by Kashmiri Pandits, which provides a firsthand reflection of the delusion, loss of relatedness, and the sense of otherness, through which they capture the trauma of a whole community. This paper discusses the personal essay, therein, titled "Days of Parting" by Arvind Gigoo, from the testimonial perspectives proposed by Laub during his study of the Holocaust.

Levels of witnessing in "Days of Parting"

First-level witnessing

With a journal entry from a year before the insurgency period, Gigoo attempts to give a firsthand experience of an ordinary person on his daily trail in Srinagar. An unexpected bomb blast in a coffee shop is where he begins his narration or recollection. This resembles the Cocoanut Grove Fire in Boston in 1942, which became the foundation for the development of 'Contemporary trauma theory in civilian contexts' (Ringel 4). The bomb explosion turns out to be a matter of discussion amongst the 'intellectuals.' The discussions become futile as they

don't discuss the commoners but the boundary issues and thus politicise the matter. In Laub's words, they, just like the outside world, are victims of a "delusional ideology", which is propagated by the perpetrators. Hence, the formers' "attempt to inform and to warn the world of what was taking place" (Laub 68) fails gloriously. Gigoo is one among the intellectuals – just that Gigoo places himself along with the exceptional group of those who pay no heed to the seriousness of the episode: "Others laugh at this bomb blast of 'no significance.' I am among the laughers" (Gigoo 141). This reveals an autobiographical awareness, the first level of witnessing, with a subtle denial of the impending trauma that has sprung in Kashmir. But until the confession comes, he reports how the 'intellectuals' are making conjectures about the bomb blast. Not an interviewer, yet a participant in the responses of others, a second-level witness, as Laub would term it. Events leading to trauma appeared in subtle shades. Soon the cinema halls closed; so also, the shops which sold film cassettes; there was a ban on playing cards. One is reminded of seventeenth-century England, the Puritan Age, and the reign of Oliver Cromwell, which demanded the closure of theatres and any other mode of entertainment. Gigoo personally knew a child who cried, fearing someone might take away his pack of cards. The feeling of insecurity is like a monster consuming the soul of every human being, irrespective of their age. Slowly but surely, Gigoo was taking cognisance of the trauma creeping into the lives of Kashmiris of different age groups, making sudden and drastic changes in their routine and peaceful lives.

For a person whose identity is rooted in his culture, 'conversion,' more clearly, religious conversion, poses a challenge to his very existence. The term has been in vogue from the days of Moses; it is discussed by Freud, when he discusses the trauma of Jews during the Nazi regime; and then it continues into the period of Colonialism, when the colonial masters took it up with utmost sincerity to help the natives attain salvation. Thus 'religion' has always been used to subvert the uncivilised and the uneducated poor. Gigoo meets in Kashmir, out of the blue, a man from Spain, a converted Muslim, who declares that Islam is the best religion in the world. He asks Gigoo, "Why don't you embrace Islam?" (Gigoo 141). Gigoo is perplexed but ignores the question. This state of every other Kashmiri is echoed in his words, "I understand nothing. And I don't care." (Gigoo 141). By taking them as "sub-human" (Laub 67), the subversion of a community has done so that the delusion which is created can never be comprehended.

Vivid remembrances and explicit details form a part of the first level of witnessing. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler rightly express that it is the experience of the event that describes the event itself (Douglass and Vogler 36). Gigoo describes the panic he experienced on the occasion of the Eid celebration; he runs, with his daughter on his shoulder, as he finds others running for no presumable reason. Gigoo is one amongst the confused populace: "People start running. There is a total confusion . . . I am panting and reach home breathless. What was the matter? I can't even guess. Nobody knows" (Gigoo 142-143). This also suggests the authorial intention to tell others, who are outside the traumatic event, about the condition of the people inside, their inability to associate with the changes rationally, yet have survived those events with incredible difficulty. Repeating the history of the Jewish Genocide, even the "most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point, it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place" (Laub 66).

The populace was like Hamelin's children who followed the piper, lured by the idea of 'freedom.' Stunning is the metamorphic effect that came upon even the educated and the civilised, for they believed the freedom of Kashmir was their ultimate aim. Gigoo witnesses the obsession with the idea of freedom at any cost, building up all around him. Much before the closing of the theatres, the idea of freedom is propagated through the film 'Lion of the Desert,' about a Libyan leader fighting against the Italian army for his country. Kashmiris flood

the theatre, and are bewitched by the ideas of the unknown agency. This delusion has formed as a deadlock over Kashmiris, from which they are still trying to disentangle themselves. When Gigoo clarifies this through his passage, he is also becoming an active witness. To picture it in terms of Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, it symbolises a transformation from the witness as a victim to the witness as a survivor (Douglass and Vogler 41).

For Laub there are neither outside nor inside witnesses to bear witness to the Holocaust experience. Similarly, those outside Kashmir never perceived the gruesomeness of the reality, even when "history was taking place before all" (Yenigül 11). Hence there are no outside witnesses. But Gigoo himself has been a mute and an unresponsive bystander, an inside witness, in the militant violence that occurred in front of his eyes. He recalls the death of a man in the bus stand: "I am walking through Hari Singh Street. I hear the sound of a gunshot. People ran away. I see a dead body on the road. Somebody has been killed. I walk up to the bus stand and board a bus that takes me home" (Gigoo 143). It is almost like the experience shared by Lawrence L. Langer, an American scholar and Holocaust analyst. He discusses the experience of a set of Jews who had to listen to the cries of another Jewish group, who were 'forced into a pit lined with quicklime then boiled alive…' and he continues, 'the cries were so terrible that we who were sitting by the pile of clothing began to tear pieces off the stuff to stop our ears' (Douglass and Vogler 38). Both Gigoo and Lawrence have not experienced the 'unprecedented agony' of the victim, yet they experience a pain that demands sympathy from the readers. As Laub says and Emmanuel Ringelbaum asserts, these survivor witnesses also suffer from 'shame,' for being passive witnesses. And it is to release them from that burden, they confess and thus become active witnesses.

The shooting of Neel Kanth Ganjoo in Hari Singh Street Market by JKLF was shocking news on the pages of the newspaper for the rest of the country. But for Gigoo, it was 'an autobiographical awareness,' a firsthand experience warranting witness. And Ganjoo became one of the earliest victims of militancy in the valley. Narrating firsthand experiences is not just cathartic for oneself, but is also a tribute to the unknown dead. A cross-reference can be made to the statement by Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler that the "Survivors of large-scale traumatic events become an extension witnesss for those absent and unable to bear themselves, this is an essential part of the genre of testimonio" (Douglass and Vogler 38). It is reconciliation for one's self as well as the vindication of the survivor. Being a witness can be as traumatic as being a victim, barring the physical pain that is experienced by the victim. By not responding to the event, by maintaining silence at the time of occurrence, Gigoo becomes a bearer of secrets. Gigoo as a victim, was passive, which stopped him from reacting at the point of his frightening experiences. As "subhumans," a position, he and other Kashmiris "have accepted and assumed as their identity by virtue of their contamination by the "secret order," they have no right to speak up or protest" (Laub 67).

By March 1990, the JKLF has provided sufficient cues to the Pandits to leave, and the exodus begins. Gigoo disengages himself from victimhood to embrace survivorship. However, the terror and helplessness return to him even when he gives the testimony. Gigoo facilitates a neighbour's leaving, yet makes no plan to leave himself, not even after the ultimatum comes. The Urdu daily that Nazir Gash shared read: "Pandits are directed to leave the valley in 36 hours" (Gigoo 147). Gigoo continues to ignore all warning signals for his family's exile. Militants openly pace up and down in front of his house. To all fearsome reports, he merely responds: "Don't worry" (Gigoo 147). From Laub's perspective, this is the outcome of the power of delusion, much like in the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." All warnings about the impending destruction are dismissed. Gigoo, thus, is a rare kind of witness who stood out from the crowd who left Kashmir much before he even decided to. The longer he stayed on, the more he got to witness what was happening around him, "for the event that had no witness to its truth essentially did not exist, and thus signified its own death, its own reduction to

silence," says (Laub 68). Foster Hal's words assert the same. To frame it in Hal's view, considering Gigoo as the "traumatic subject," a silent witness of the events, he "does indeed exist … (and) has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe in it or not" quoted in (Douglass and Vogler 36).

Pandits are isolated and ostracised by other Kashmiris. Gigoo being a teacher, has earned respect from his students and colleagues, but when things start to change, everything goes upside down. Even in public transport, he is looked down on by others as he is no more an insider but is considered as an intruder. This leads to creating a 'secret order' (Laub 67), which makes the victims feel that they are supposed to be considered objects and so should remain silent. Moreover, they turn out to be 'sub-humans' (Laub 67). Gigoo does not attempt to find the exact statistics or numbers to state his point but testifies to the personal experience and focuses more on "the reality of an unimaginable occurrence" (LaCapra 88).

Gigoo stays inside his house due to fear, when a Muslim woman utters curses on Pandits as a Muslim is killed in the neighbourhood. Pandits who are left in the valley are always under suspicion. Gigoo also comes across such questions, even from his friends, where he maintains silence and claims to be unafraid. He tries to maintain peace and solve the issues without any fanfare. The 'psychic disturbance and disconnection' (Leydesdorff et al. 2) that he has experienced gives testimony to the trauma that he has undergone.

Second-level witnessing

Gigoo's second level of witnessing occurs through the experiences of his wife, who was a school teacher. Her students reported that the absentees had "crossed." The term was popular among the students but new to the teacher. She had to be told more explicitly that he had "crossed the border." Gigoo's wife, like Gigoo, confesses: "I didn't understand anything . . . I understood nothing" (Gigoo 165). The Kashmiri youth had begun nurturing militancy as an option to win freedom. The second clue comes from a casual report of a kindergarten student about how they make 'crackers' at home. Gigoo takes it for the casual boasting of a little boy, who merely enjoys the attention of its teachers. The third report is what sets him thinking: that of students fainting because they smell the gunpowder. Through the sequence of these school reports, Gigoo participates in the accounts given to him but never once gauges the gravity of the reports. Gigoo recollects these incidents in his memoir, years after the incidents have happened, "belatedly" (Laub 69). As Laub suggests, it refers to a "historical gap" (Laub 69), which the event has created in the collective witnessing.

> The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence*. The degree to which bearing witness was required, … it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. There was therefore no concurrent "knowing" or assimilation of the history of the occurrence. (Laub 68)

Thus, Gigoo is solving the puzzle, filling the gaps, using the anecdotes and experiences of others around him, to enable himself as well as others to decipher the whole picture of the traumatic events.

Gigoo's father maintains silence, and represses his thoughts and worries. He has never imagined a life beyond Kashmir. In Laub's terms, had he been able to think of the possibility of a life beyond that, he could have lived a better life. Viktor E. Frankl elaborates on the meaning of the Latin word, 'finis,' concerning the experiences in a concentration camp. He phrases it as a man's inability "to see the end of his 'provisional existence'… He ceased living for the future, in contrast to a man in normal life. Therefore, the whole structure of his inner life changed; signs of decay set in which we know from other areas of life" (Frankl 79). Gigoo's father too is entangled in that temporal quality of trauma.

Gigoo's diary entry gradually gives the sense of an ongoing war: "Searches and searches. Deaths. Killings. It is horrible" (Gigoo 145). Gigoo records the words of a Muslim neighbour who worries in confidence: "I am afraid of my own son. Strangers are his friends. I have never seen them" (Gigoo 145). Horror and ensuing trauma seep into families, breaking the bonds of love, spreading the venom of hatred. This reveals the importance of giving testimony and also the struggle involved in the process of giving testimony. The Muslim neighbour makes an effort to survive by maintaining a witness whom he believes can help him out; else, he will be trapped in his trauma. However, the truth of the testimony is retained as a threat to his life. As Laub pronounces it rightly, "testimony aspires to recapture the lost truth of (that) reality, but the realisation of the testimony is not the fulfillment of (this) promise" (Laub 73).

Once the severity of the situation is established, Gigoo's records give the picture of the terror penetrating the entire community; now it is the witnessing of the trauma of not just individuals or families, but of an entire community, and a state. "'When are you leaving?' This is the refrain in every Pandit conversation. There is terror in the minds of all Kashmiri Pandits who are called Bhattas" (Gigoo 145). "Run away," is the advice 'amongst' and 'for' all Pandits. They are forced to dehumanise themselves by choosing between life in a land unknown to them and death, erasing their identity and existence. Alienated in their own land, they opt to live a life of aliens.

Gigoo relives the experience of the others when he listens to and describes their situation. Gigoo explains his wife's trauma she experienced in his absence: "When my wife sees me she is very tense and says that in my absence a young man had been asking for me. She says that she has never seen the young man before" (Gigoo156).

Finally, in June of 1990, when Prithvi Nath Tiku is also killed, Gigoo's wife and mother can take it no more. His wife goads him to take the call, make the decision to leave for the safety of the family. He responds to that finally, "'Give me a minute to think,' I tell them. In that one minute I decide to leave. We pack our things. Father is weeping" (Gigoo 155). The uprooting is more or less complete. Here, Gigoo even expects the reader, who is an implied listener, to live the experience, the terror that is gripping the lives of Kashmiri Pandits. Later, Gigoo also talks about the relief other Kashmiris experience when they move and settle in Jammu.

Gigoo's father, who owned a laboratory, came home early one day: "Today he is home with the microscope in his hand. He is perspiring and nervous. He drinks water and then says: 'All the women asked me to go home and not to come in the future'" (Gigoo 149). For the first time, Gigoo found his father in a terror-stricken state. This enabled him to make that decision in 'one minute' to leave to a safer place. Five years later, in Jammu, Gigoo's father loses his memory; he is unable to recognise even his son. Laub had warned through his Holocaust experience that no observer could remain unharmed by the witnessing. Father had always been silent. The silence brewed into a distorted memory, and the distortion led to a loss of the "sense of human *relatedness*" (Laub 64). The time-lapse had let him think, like the latency period; it distorted the truth and diminished his memory, from which he never escaped. The collapse of witnessing had occurred. It was caused by the failure of expression.

Gigoo's father is one among many who have lost their memory as they left their native land. The Muslim brothers, too, are victims of such memory loss due to the fear of guns or due to the death of someone near and dear. There are newspaper reports on dementia and mental degradation that the Kashmiris suffer due to displacement, shock and fear. And thus, the collapse of victims becomes a trauma for the nation as well.

Laub emphasises the importance of such works as they are produced after a particular period, which is received as the testimony to the event, leaving a "*historical gap*" (Laub 69)

through which, the truth reemerges, as it takes the form of a narrative in the presence of a listener.

Third-level witnessing

Lassa Kaul, ‘a real Kashmiri’, and the Director of Doordarshan Kendra, is killed. Terror was getting closer for Gigoo. Kaul was a friend. He accompanies the funeral procession in which hundreds of Muslims also take part, livid about the killing. By elaborating on the incident in his testimony, Gigoo exemplifies “what was ultimately missing in … the human cognitive capacity to perceive and to assimilate the totality of what was really happening at the time” (Laub 69). Gigoo is baffled by encountering the crowd, which reflects the religious unison, a stark contrast to his experiences as a Kashmiri Pandit. His testimony suggests the incompleteness of the assimilation to date.

Gigoo speaks about the kidnapping of Soom Nath Saproo, a neighbour, who, after his release, is dumbfounded. Gigoo’s relations with his friends break in the tension of the events and also due to mistrust. Testimony, as Laub says, is “the process of facing the loss,” and it reminds Gigoo of nothing but “experience of separation and loss” (Laub 74).

The traumatic past is required to be expressed by choosing the right word, and also must be heard by the right listener, as it remains to be a story hard to put into words with the right structures. At the end of his essay, Gigoo writes to the readers on the pathetic condition of the Pandits, suggesting the “obliteration of the story” (Laub 64) is impossible as he considers the necessity of an implied audience, the nation itself.

It is not the historical facts; instead, the testimony itself stands as the truth. Even in the last part of the essay, Gigoo unravels the condition of Pandits even now, believing the listener will understand the situation well. For Gigoo, trauma is like a “double wound” (Caruth 3), which returns to haunt him. And for a “sensitive reader,” they can associate the pain of the author “in the attempt to imagine what would it be like to be” (Douglass and Vogler 39) a victim of forced exile. The trauma of Kashmiri Pandits is endless, not just because of the distorted past and the damage it has done, but because they remain as outsiders to their own home, as migrants in their own nation, and as a cause of the national trauma.

It creates two worlds – one that reveals the traumatic past and the present with the damage done by the past, which is never going to change. This damage done to the psyche can be observed in Gigoo’s writing too. His writings are scattered and are in fragmented forms. Every incident is traumatic, and thus choosing becomes a challenging task; organising the same is difficult since it is hard to put it into a well-knit essay/story. Assimilation of that of the mortified past and the damaged present is not possible.

In his recollections, Gigoo suddenly goes into a flashback. There is a sudden contrast in his memory of the turbulence of the present with the peacefulness of the past. The good old days bore witness to a harmonious coexistence. Pandits and Muslims never lived exclusively. Pandits attended the Eid celebrations, and for Pandit marriages, carpets and furnishings came from the Muslim neighbours. Each community had its allegiances, but that did not deter their communal harmony. His reflections led him to chronicle the golden achievements of the sons of the soil. The memoir is now a historical record of sorts. He reminisces, the genial whistling the locality used to call out to one another. Back to reality, as a displaced Pandit, now it is only his own family which will respond to his whistles! The present cannot associate itself with or assimilate the “too-good-to-remember” past.

By reclaiming his experiences, Gigoo reclaims the inner witness, identifies the presence of the “thou”, a listener, and in this case, the reader, and thus becomes the subject. Dori Laub rightly asserted that “survivors” like Gigoo needed to “survive to tell the tale, but also had to tell their tale to survive” (Laub 63). Finally, it is also a call to the reader to take up the shared responsibility for the situation. Laub insists that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant

and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening he comes to partially experience the trauma himself" (Laub, Dori. 57). Gigoo seems, in his recalling, to expect the reader, who is an implied listener, to relive the experience with him. The imperative to tell and be heard, can, after all, be a life-consuming task, as in the case of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner." Not telling the story, according to Laub, would contribute to "the perpetuation of its tyranny" (Laub, Dori .64). The traumatic past requires to be expressed. Yet the challenge is in articulating with the right choice of words, to the right listener, a story that is incomprehensible in its entirety.

Conclusion

Days of Parting is a testimony to the truth. The memoir sets an example to what Laub calls – "historical retroaction" (70). Yet, the realisation of the truth does not erase the traumatic past. One can observe the trauma they experience and witness, one that reappears and reminds them of the past. The memories of the past force them to give testimony in order to survive. And testimony makes them relive the traumatic experiences as they have witnessed. The life of any Kashmiri begins and ends in this loop, entrapped forever. Hence, trauma turns out to be a "Tar Baby" for a Kashmiri, from which 'escape' becomes impossible.

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