

Depiction of Kashmiri Identity in Diaspora Works

Aabirou Jahan

M. A English, Central University of Kashmir

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1408000053>

Abstract: Suitcases Packed with memories, languages stitched into accents, recipes whispered across generations - this is the living archive of diaspora. This article provides an extensive and affirmative examination of Kashmiri identity within diasporic literature, focusing on memory as a mechanism for cultural preservation in Rahul Pandita's *"Our Moon Has Blood Clots"* (2013), the intricate interplay of moral complexity and identity negotiation in Mirza Waheed's *"The Collaborator"* (2011), and the dynamics of identity, hybridity, and belonging in Siddhartha Gigoo's *"The Garden of Solitude"* (2011) as critically analyzed by Saikat Ghosh. It integrates the salad bowl metaphor, representing cultural coexistence, and diaspora consciousness, embodying an enduring connection to the homeland. This study celebrates the resilience, cultural pride, and communal strength embedded in these narratives, offering a detailed and accessible analysis that reflects the transformative power of Kashmiri diasporic literature.

I. Introduction

Indians have a long history of migration to many parts of world. According to the report of United Nations, India is the largest country of origin for expatriates and immigrant communities. From the shores of the subcontinent to the farthest corners of the world, the journey of the Indian diaspora unfolds as a saga of resilience, enterprise, and cultural vibrancy. Spanning centuries, this diaspora has left an indelible mark on the historical landscape, while simultaneously shaping the present and influencing the future.

The Kashmiri diaspora emerged from the forced displacement of approximately 300,000 Pandits during the 1989–1990 exodus, a period of intense insurgency in the Kashmir Valley that shattered deep emotional and physical connections to a homeland renowned for its tranquil Dal Lake, the vibrant autumnal chinar trees, and a rich cultural tapestry often hailed as "paradise on earth." This traumatic migration has given rise to a robust literary tradition that serves as a sanctuary for memory, a forum for moral reflection, and a canvas for negotiating hybrid identities in exile. In this article, I explore these dimensions through Rahul Pandita's *"Our Moon Has Blood Clots"* (2013), Mirza Waheed's *"The Collaborator"* (2011), and Siddhartha Gigoo's *"The Garden of Solitude"* (2011), enriched by Saikat Ghosh's critical insights, presenting a comprehensive analysis that stands alone for readers.

The theoretical framework is a cornerstone of this study, drawing on a diverse array of critical perspectives to illuminate the Kashmiri experience. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) provides a culturally grounded approach, stating, "Socio-emotional intelligence, often referred to as emotional intelligence, plays a crucial role in an individual's personal and professional success. It encompasses qualities such as self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. One of the key factors that necessitates a focus on socioemotional development in India is the diverse and complex social fabric of the country. India is home to diverse cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity often poses challenges in interpersonal relationships and communication, requiring individuals to develop empathy, tolerance, and understanding" (IKS Reference, 2023). I employ IKS to analyze how Kashmiri literature fosters emotional resilience and empathy, enabling the preservation of cultural identity amidst the challenges of exile. This framework's emphasis on tolerance and understanding is particularly relevant, as it mirrors the pre-exodus communal harmony these narratives seek to reclaim, offering a lens to understand the emotional depth of displacement.

"Diaspora Book: Displacements" (2020) offers a therapeutic perspective, asserting, "Whether it is by choice or otherwise, the Diaspora expatriate has committed atrophy on himself, and the healing, if there is one, is in the empathy and mute admiration of his efforts. Diaspora literature works as a channel to strength the bonds between the different states of India and of India in relation with the other countries at large. Diasporic opinion helps to break through the past alienation and isolation which caused much injustice and abuse of human rights. It also serves as an outlet to the pent up passions, emotions and feelings, providing a ventilator to grievances and grudges. In other words diasporic literature helps as a cathartic indignation. The welfare and wellbeing of the overseas Indians, a sense of security for them and India's greater concern for them is brought out through these writings." This text is integral to the article, framing Kashmiri literature as a cathartic response to the trauma of the 1989 exodus. It highlights the healing potential of these narratives, reinforcing diaspora consciousness—the emotional and cultural tether to Kashmir—that fosters a sense of belonging and security. This perspective relates directly to the article by addressing historical injustices and providing a therapeutic outlet, making it accessible as a standalone narrative of resilience.

Dr. Sandhya Tiwari's scholarly articles, sourced from Research Gate, provide critical comparative insights that enrich this analysis. In "Constituents and Issues of Identity Construction among Diaspora Communities in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *"Sea of Poppies"*", Tiwari delves into the processes through which diaspora communities construct identity, emphasizing memory, adaptation, and negotiation as key mechanisms.

The idea of "being" or "becoming" of identity is a relative term that is affected by time and space. The interface and existence of the two places cultivates conflict of identity in the person. No one can be independent of his/her identity of past or present. It is the political, cultural and social scenario of the place and time that will impact the individual's identity. Consequently, identity relates itself to the individual, social, cultural and national aspects. (Tiwari, 2017)

She argues that identity is a dynamic interplay between homeland and host land cultures, shaped by migration's socio-political context. This article is utilized in the study to scaffold the analysis of Kashmiri identity formation, offering a theoretical foundation to understand how memory and adaptation shape the narratives of Pandita, Waheed, and Gigoo. It evolves in the article by providing a comparative lens, allowing readers to see Kashmiri experiences within a broader diaspora context, accessible without prior knowledge.

Tiwari's "Migration and the Impact of Cross-Cultural Experiences in Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight*" (2023) explores how migration influences identity through cross-cultural interactions, stating, "Diaspora literature revolves around the idea of a homeland or a place where displacement happens and deals with the narration of harsh exile." This article is employed to highlight the psychological and cultural dimensions of displacement, resonating with the Kashmiri longing for Srinagar. It evolves by offering a comparative narrative that enriches the understanding of exile's emotional toll, providing readers with a framework to appreciate the sensory richness of Pandita's work and the adaptive strategies in Gigoo's text.

Her "Chorography of Contemporary Migrations and Fractured Identities in Kamila Shamsie's Novel *Home Fire*" (2023) examines migration's impact on identity, noting, "Migration... becomes a catalyst for the fragmentation of identities, unravelling struggles with belonging, cultural boundaries, and the profound impact of political and social factors." This article is integrated to explore the fractured yet adaptive identities in the Kashmiri narratives, particularly Waheed's protagonist. It evolves by providing a detailed analysis of how political and social forces shape identity, offering readers a nuanced understanding of moral complexity and belonging struggles, enhancing the article's depth.

Postcolonial theorists further deepen the framework. Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978) critiques the West's misrepresentation of the East, applied here to counter exoticized portrayals of Kashmir, aligning with the resistance narratives in these texts. It evolves by framing the Kashmiri experience as a challenge to colonial stereotypes, accessible to readers as a political critique. Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" explores hybrid identities in cultural interstices, directly applicable to the Kashmiri diaspora's blending of past and present, evolving as a lens for hybridity analysis. Stuart Hall's "becoming" views identity as an evolving process, offering a dynamic perspective on cultural adaptation, evolving by providing a process-oriented understanding. These theorists situate Kashmiri literature within global discourses, examining how memory, morality, and hybridity resist marginalization.

Memory as Cultural Preservation in *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*

For many in the diaspora, Life unfolds between two worlds: The land they call home and the one that still lives in their heart. Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013) is a deeply moving memoir that chronicles the 1989–1990 exodus of Kashmiri Pandits, with memory serving as the cornerstone for cultural preservation. The narrative vividly captures the trauma of displacement, detailing the loss of Srinagar's serene landscapes—Dal Lake's shimmering waters reflecting the Himalayas, the fiery autumnal chinar trees, and the resonant temple bells—alongside the rich communal rituals that defined Pandit life. Pandita meticulously describes the Herath festival, with its aromatic saffron offerings, the tactile warmth of walnuts cracked during prayers, visits to Shankaracharya temple, and the preparation of wazwan feasts involving entire families and neighbors. He also paints a picture of bustling markets filled with the scent of spices and sacred temples where community gatherings fostered a sense of unity. These recollections are not mere nostalgia; they are a deliberate and strategic effort to preserve a cultural heritage threatened by the violence and subsequent exile, a theme that forms the backbone of this section.

Memory plays a multifaceted and critical role in sustaining Kashmiri Pandit identity, acting as a resistant archive against the political erasure that followed the exodus. Pandita reconstructs pre-conflict Kashmir through a rich tapestry of sensory details—families gathered for Herath prayers under the glow of oil lamps symbolizing hope and renewal, the shared joy of wazwan feasts that brought communities together, and the rhythmic chants echoing through temple courtyards. This effort to preserve cultural continuity is particularly evident in the intergenerational transmission of memories, where grandparents recount tales of Srinagar's pristine beauty—its snow-capped peaks and lotus-filled lakes—and children absorb folk songs and stories of resilience, ensuring that the cultural legacy endures. The *Indian Knowledge System* (IKS) supports this preservation through its emphasis on "empathy, tolerance, and understanding" (IKS Reference, 2023), fostering emotional resilience that enables Pandita to evoke a harmonious pre-exodus society where diverse communities coexisted. This aligns with the salad bowl metaphor, which depicts a diverse yet cohesive cultural landscape where Hindu and Muslim communities thrived as distinct yet interdependent elements. Pandita's narrative reclaims this lost multicultural harmony, resisting assimilation into a homogenized exile identity by maintaining these traditions even in refugee camps.

"Diaspora Book: Displacements" (2020) frames this memory work as a cathartic process, asserting, "The healing... is in the empathy and mute admiration of his efforts... diasporic literature helps as a cathartic indignation." Pandita's depiction of refugee camp life—families sharing meagre meals under tarpaulin shelters, children inventing games to cope with loss, and elders narrating tales of courage and survival—transforms the trauma of displacement into a healing narrative. This catharsis is intricately linked to diaspora consciousness, the persistent emotional and cultural connection to Kashmir, evident in the performance of Herath rituals with makeshift altars, "on the first day I filled water in a bucket to take a bath. *The first mug that I pored over myself signed me I was reminded of how we would bathe back home in Srinagar*" and the preservation of wazwan recipes despite limited resources. This consciousness aligns with "Displacements" focus on the welfare and security of overseas Indians, providing a therapeutic outlet for the diaspora's grief.

Dr. Sandhya Tiwari's articles offer comparative depth. In "Constituents and Issues of Identity Construction among Diaspora Communities in Amitav Ghosh's Novel "Sea of Poppies" Tiwari argues that identity is a dynamic process shaped by memory, adaptation, and negotiation within the socio-political context of migration. This perspective is reflected in Pandita's use of memory to construct a resilient Pandit identity, evolving in the article as a framework to understand how past narratives anchor the present. Her "Migration and the Impact of Cross-Cultural Experiences in Manjushree Thapa's "Seasons of Flight" (2023) states, "Diaspora literature revolves around the idea of a homeland or a place where displacement happens and deals with the narration of harsh exile," paralleling Pandita's sensory evocations of Srinagar. This evolves by highlighting the emotional toll of exile, enriching the analysis of memory's role. Her "Chorography of Contemporary Migrations and Fractured Identities in Kamila Shamsie's Novel "Home Fire"" (2023) notes, "Migration... becomes a catalyst for the fragmentation of identities," but Pandita counters this with memory's unifying force, evolving as a narrative of cultural resilience. Edward Said's "Orientalism" (1978) relates, as Pandita resists Kashmir's exoticization, offering an authentic counter-narrative that evolves as a political stance. Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" creates a hybrid cultural realm, blending traditions with exile influences, while Stuart Hall's "becoming" supports this evolving identity, reflecting memory's dynamic preservation.

Moral Complexity and Identity Negotiation in "The Collaborator"

Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2011) delves into the moral complexities and identity negotiations of a young Kashmiri boy who becomes an informer during the insurgency, a narrative rich with ethical tension and explored in detail in this section. The text is set against a war-torn Kashmir, where the protagonist's village becomes a landscape of violence and loss, marked by the death of childhood friends, the abandonment of homes with their faded photographs, and the omnipresent sound of gunfire. His journey from innocence to complicity unfolds through introspective reflections—reminiscing about carefree games by the river, the acrid smell of burning villages, and the moral weight of assisting the Indian Army in exchange for safety—offering a profound exploration of survival versus betrayal.

Moral complexity is a central theme, as the protagonist grapples with an intricate web of guilt, loyalty, and the harsh realities of war. His internal conflict is vividly portrayed in his reluctant cataloging of dead bodies, each entry a stab of conscience, and his oscillation between self-preservation—accepting food and shelter from the Army—and the betrayal of his community, a duality that shapes his fractured identity. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) supports this through "emotional regulation and interpersonal skills" (IKS Reference, 2023), fostering resilience as he navigates guilt and fear. This emotional regulation is evident in his attempts to rationalize his actions, seeking redemption through silent prayers amidst the chaos. The salad bowl metaphor illuminates a pre-insurgency Kashmir where cultural coexistence between Hindu and Muslim communities flourished, disrupted by conflict, which his informer role further complicates, reflecting a lost harmony.

Sandhya Tiwari's work provides a cathartic framework, asserting, "Diaspora literature serves as an outlet to the pent up passions, emotions and feelings," as his narrative vents the moral turmoil of his choices. This catharsis is sustained by diaspora consciousness, the persistent emotional tie to Kashmir despite his compromised position, evident in his longing for the valley's rivers and mountains even as he collaborates. Dr. Sandhya Tiwari's "Constituents and Issues of Identity Construction" highlights negotiation as a key identity process, evolving in the article as a lens to understand his liminality between victim and perpetrator. Her "Chorography of Contemporary Migrations and Fractured Identities" (2023) parallels this with "fragmentation of identities," reflecting his struggle, while *Seasons of Flight* (2023) suggests growth potential, as his negotiation evolves into a complex identity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the political context shaping his choices, resisting colonial misrepresentations, evolving as a critique of the insurgency's portrayal. Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" highlights his hybrid identity, a space of moral tension, while Stuart Hall's "becoming" supports this dynamic evolution, reflecting moral complexity as a driver of identity.

Identity, Hybridity, and Belonging in *The Garden of Solitude* with Saikat Ghosh's Analysis

Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* (2011), analyzed by Saikat Ghosh, portrays the Kashmiri Pandit exile, focusing on identity, hybridity, and belonging, a theme richly developed in this section. The narrative traces the lives of Pandit families in refugee camps, blending vivid memories of Kashmir's saffron fields swaying in the breeze, the joyous chaos of festivals, and the solitude of its gardens with the stark realities of displacement. Elders from both communities would gather for leisurely talks, discussing religion, politics, philosophy, and even Rumi's poetry while sharing jajeer (a traditional hookah)—an emblem of trust and familiarity—dusty tents, limited resources, and the hum of distant traffic. The protagonist navigates this duality, recalling the fragrance of his homeland while adapting to the monotony of camp life, illustrating a hybrid identity formation that Ghosh emphasizes as cultural fusion.

Identity, hybridity, and belonging are intricately interwoven, as characters adapt to exile while retaining deep cultural ties. They maintain rituals like Shivratri with improvised altars made from camp materials, sharing nostalgic tales of Srinagar's pristine lakes and bustling streets, fostering a sense of belonging amidst adversity. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) supports this through "tolerance and understanding" (IKS Reference, 2023), reflecting the salad bowl metaphor's coexistence, where Kashmiri and exile identities blend harmoniously, a process enriched by their adoption of new languages and customs. "Diaspora Book: Displacements" (2020) fosters pride in this adaptation, reinforcing diaspora consciousness sustained by communal storytelling—elders recounting legends, children learning Kashmiri songs—aligning with its focus on the welfare of overseas Indians. Dr. Sandhya Tiwari's "Constituents and Issues of Identity Construction" reinforces this adaptability, evolving as a framework for understanding hybridity.

Her *Seasons of Flight* (2023) parallels adaptive growth, while “Chorography of Contemporary Migrations” (2023) resolves fragmentation in Gigoo’s belonging narrative. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) counters misrepresentation, Homi K. Bhabha’s “third space” enriches hybridity, and Stuart Hall’s “becoming” supports evolution, reflecting a resilience strategy.

II. Conclusion

This article celebrates the resilience of Kashmiri identity through the lens of Memory in *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, which preserves cultural heritage with vivid recollections and intergenerational transmission, countering erasure with a cathartic narrative reinforced by diaspora consciousness and the salad bowl metaphor’s vision of coexistence. *The Collaborator* navigates moral complexity and identity negotiation, portraying a protagonist’s ethical struggles and hybrid liminality, shaped by political forces and evolving through catharsis and becoming, resisting misrepresentation as per Said’s exile. *The Garden of Solitude* embodies identity, hybridity, and belonging, blending past and present in a third space, fostering pride and adaptation through diaspora consciousness and the salad bowl metaphor. Grounded in IKS’s emotional resilience, Displacement’s healing, Tiwari’s migration insights, and postcolonial frameworks from Said, Bhabha, and Hall, this analysis affirms the transformative power of diasporic literature. It heals trauma, resists marginalization, and unites communities, inviting further research into its role in preserving Kashmiri heritage amidst global migration challenges.

References

1. Bhabha, H. K. (1994), “The Location of Culture”, Routledge.
2. Hall, S. (1990), “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In “Identity: Community, Culture, Difference”, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237, Lawrence & Wishart.
3. Gigoo, S. (2011). *The Garden of Solitude*. Rupa Publications.
4. Pandita, R. (2013) *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*. Random House India.
5. Said, E. W. (1978), “Orientalism”, Pantheon Books.
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:SP6oXDckpogC
6. Tiwari, S. (2023). “Indian Knowledge System”. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*. Page nos. 191-200
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:ns9cj8rnVeAC
7. Tiwari, S. (2009) *Displacements and Alienation of Indian Diaspora*. Displacements and Alienation of Indian Diaspora in the Selected Works of Chitra Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherji and Jhumpa Lahiri. Research India Press.
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:dhFuZR0502QC
8. Tiwari, S. (2023), “Constituents and Issues of Identity Construction among Diaspora Communities in Amitav Ghosh’s Novel *Sea of Poppies*”. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*.
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:5nxA0vEk-isC
9. Tiwari, S. (2023), *Migration and the Impact of Cross-Cultural Experiences in Manjushree Thapa’s Seasons of Flight*. Posted: November 30, 2023. Written: November 18, 2023.
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&cstart=20&pagesize=80&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:k_IJM867U9cC
10. Tiwari, S. (2023), *Chorography of Contemporary Migrations and Fractured Identities in Kamila Shamsie’s Novel “Home Fire”*, ResearchGate.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378227775_Chorography_of_Contemporary_Migrations_and_Fractured_Identities_in_Kamila_Shamsie's_Novel_Home_Fire
11. Waheed, M. (2011) *The Collaborator*. Penguin Books.
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:WbkHhVStYXYC
https://scholar.google.co.in/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ&citation_for_view=Cdg_M2IAAAAJ:SP6oXDckpogC