

Perceptions Of Reality In Siddhartha Gigoo’s New Novel

How do those subjected to loss and trauma really remember it?

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“Indeed, reality need not be confined to rationality, and for an individual, it may simply be an elaborate illusion. As part of the workings of Zooni’s consciousness, random images are conjured up which are part-real part-imaginary: “A woman standing next to me is looking at me with mischief in her eyes...Her nose is flat...In the sky float small reflections of people familiar and unfamiliar. One such face is of the flat-nosed girl looking intently at me with a strange expression and a desire to make me remember her.”

Formidable and imposing, confounding but stunning, subtle yet weighty, The Lion of Kashmir is a pathbreaking work, in its surreal narrative, the fluid/static narration, and the unreliable narrator. Kashmir’s territorial conflict has percolated into the psyche of its people, leaving ordinary minds struggling to find meaning of their troubled existence under warped conditions while holding on to vestiges of their crumbling sanity. The Lion of Kashmir, a winding labyrinth of the human mindscape, explores this convoluted life. On the surface, it is a daughter’s account of trying to comprehend her relationship with her father within the frame of her “home” – “Kashmir has become a strange place...It seems unreal and hypnotic like a movie set or a fantasy. It entices with its false pretence...” At another level, however, the novel also documents an alternative history of a derelict paradise and its people’s fragmented existence, conflicts between identities, ideologies and affiliations.

What makes Siddhartha Gigoo’s third novel remarkable but also taxing is the portrayal of the inner psychosomatic processes of the protagonist, Zooni, who returns home from her more secure life in London to look for her missing father, Abdul Aziz, a commandant in the Special Forces. In the process, as the internal rhythms of thought and experience are unravelled, the novel fortifies that what we believe to be reality has a contrasting shadow too, especially when it comes to Kashmir.

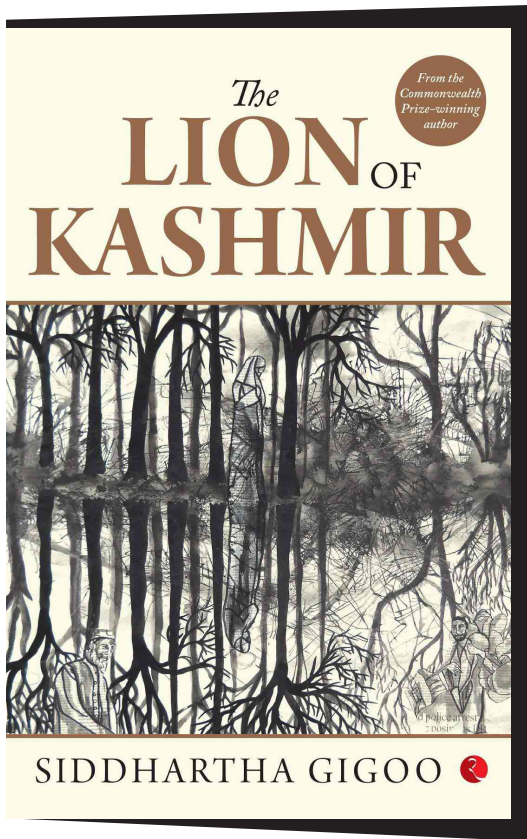
Stream of consciousness

The Lion of Kashmir, divided into three sections, opens with a prologue – a dream sequence where Zooni plots to kill her brother, Zubair, by throwing him into the river on the pretext of teaching him to swim. It sets the pitch of the novel: exploring reality through the unreal. As Zooni says, “Your dreams can’t compare with mine...I knew they weren’t true but I believed them.”

Bringing forth Jorge Luis Borges’s idea of how the mind organises elements for a different realm, be it that of memory, hallucination, illusion or dreams, in which an individual can shape, share and confide their inner thoughts, Gigoo seems to reiterate the implication of Borges’s works – the “creative act of Being is one that alters the totality of Being, it alters the past and the future”. Neither of them can be exclusive.

The very setting of the shadow boundaries, “Penumbra” and “Umbra”, as the names for the first two sections – though the third is simply titled “The Journal of Abdul Aziz” – hints at the prosaic acceptance of incomprehensibility of what perhaps exists beyond the physical. Gigoo blends realms of dreams, imagination, memory and delusion into everyday experiences, blurring the line between reality and fabrications of the mind while deconstructing the truths of reality.

Through the technique of stream of consciousness, he offers a unique perspective on life, situations and events in Kashmir, resulting in what French philosopher Henri Bergson enunciates as the principle of giving “a direct quotation of the mind”. While Zooni recollects her past, the delusional interfaces reflect not only the complexities of her relationships with her father – “Dad is talking to me. But I can’t see him. He says I’m in his sight.” – but also the interstices between power struggles and contrasting ideological affiliations in the Valley – “He knew survival was almost next to impossible. The very people he fought were his own people but he still fought them because he knew they were wrong.” However, as the real and the fictitious overlap in this text, a sense of ambiguity



The Lion of Kashmir, Siddhartha Gigoo, Rupa Publications

ity takes over, even as readers are acquainted with new dimensions of the novel and its world.

Memory and time

Indeed, reality need not be confined to rationality, and for an individual, it may simply be an elaborate illusion. As part of the workings of Zooni’s consciousness, random images are conjured up which are part-real part-imaginary: “A woman standing next to me is looking at me with mischief in her eyes...Her nose is flat...In the sky float small reflections of people familiar and unfamiliar. One such face is of the flat-nosed girl looking intently at me with a strange expression and a desire to make me remember her.”

Zooni comes across the flat-nosed character again later in the safe-house in her mindspace where she awaits Uncle Dar, her Dad’s subordinate, to come for her and Zubair. She is the rustic girl, Muknas, who saves calves, even Zooni, only to cut her wrist subsequently – “Look at what you have done, Flatnose. You have mistaken me for yourself.” Identities blur; who is saving whom?

It is through the interface of these two female characters that Gigoo renders into language some of the nuances of mood and existence amidst a conflict, the countless fleeting shades of meaning, in order to capture the sentiment in its tainted essence. The next morning’s newspaper reports the killing of Salim Dar by the militants and his daughter’s suicide: “Uncle Dar’s daughter, whom I’d spent the night with and whom I called flatnose, is smiling and happy.” The border between wakefulness and sleep, dreams and reality, calls into question the degree to which liminality actually exists, persuading the reader to

question the very credibility of one’s own existence.

Zooni feels the need to “assess the present” and “hold someone responsible for everything”, but the “only way forward is going backwards”. And yet she must navigate the past to make sense of the present. The narrative oscillates between the past and the present, bringing to mind Bergson’s interpretation of the phenomenon of memoir par excellence, whereby the involuntary memory, unlike the voluntary memory, “stores up past by the mere necessity of its own nature”.

It is through this kind of memory that Gigoo conveys a sense of reality that is both vital and dynamic. It is, in fact, in memoir involuntaire that one can witness a perfect juxtaposition of the past and the present. The novel negates linearity in an attempt to replicate the constant accumulation and reinvention of memory.

An engaging corollary drawn is the idea of time in relation to memory, underscoring how past, present and future resist definitive distinctions, all three existing simultaneously in the act of remembering. As the symbolism of time acquires greater significance in the novel, one is reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre’s comment: “Man’s misfortune lies in his being time-bound...time is your misfortune.”

Textures of consciousness

As Zooni’s personality drifts through time, it remains in a continual process of becoming, so that her character can be traced through the multiple layers of organisms, tangibility and the ambivalent inner. Also, it is through the meanderings of Zooni’s consciousness that the reader is not merely introduced to the other characters – her father Abdul Aziz, Salim Dar, Sridhar and others – but is also made aware of the infinite infusions of an individual place into particular times and spaces.

While Aziz and Dar present different tinges of the same reality, it is perhaps left for the reader to decide who the “Lion of Kashmir” is. The section depicting Aziz’s journal delves into two trajectories of the struggle – “I stand for arms and you stand for ideas” – but the means and the end of the struggle get mixed up. Meanwhile, Zooni and Flatnose, no matter how chaotic their narrative is, once again manifest the incomplete nature of discovering and comprehending life. There are certain depths which can never be touched and deciphered, perhaps.

Furthermore, an essential aspect of Gigoo’s characterisation scheme is endowing animals with an individuality of their own. In The Lion of Kashmir, the insects, Whitey the female dog, and Rani the pigeon, are all crucial to the construction and comprehension of a world that can no longer be approached as an object but as a creation of the mind. The anthropomorphism adds another dimension to the whole design of magic realism patterned out in the novel.

As with Gigoo’s earlier works, this one too excludes the traumas and presents the inward textures of consciousness in a prose that is woven with intelligence, unpredictability and tough truths. The Lion of Kashmir is a work of profoundly moving depth, intriguing and mystifying at the same time. Though disconcerting, the dialogical intersections make it a powerful narrative, with the effect diffusing through the reader’s contemplative psyche. There is to the discerning reader a distinct paradox at the centre of Gigoo’s writing, the ontological question, called the Borgesian conundrum, of “whether a writer writes the story or it writes him”.

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Women In India: Issues And Challenges

DR. IMTIYAZ WANI

Women play a very significant role in the overall development of any society and Kashmir is no exception. But what is ironic is that despite her equal share in the human development she remains at the mercy of men at least in our part of the world.

The silver lining however is the recent surge in women led protest movements mainly on the global scale. She is out there to challenge the well established gender biased norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal stranglehold over the fairer sex.

Woman is a very strong character than a man as she not only has to take care of herself but whole family as a daughter, granddaughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, etc. No mean task by any stretch of imagination. Add to this her role as an active member of the society as a working lady in different spheres of life. Woman has come of age.

Earlier women in India were facing problems like child marriage, sati pratha, parda pratha, restriction to widow remarriage, widow exploitation, devadasi system, etc. However, almost all such old practices have almost vanished. But that doesn’t mean an end to the challenges women face. New and modern day challenges have cropped up making life uneasy for women.



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Such issues facing women still consume the attention of researchers in social sciences, governments, planning groups, social workers and reformers.

Approaches to the study of women’s problems range from the study of gerontology to psychiatry and criminology. But one important problem relating to

women which has been vastly ignored is the problem of violence against women.

Violence against Women

Violence against women is perhaps as old as mankind. At present it is found not only in under developed countries or developing countries but even in developed world. In Indian society woman is still viewed primarily as her husband’s property. The husband has the same proprietary right over her as he has over other assets in the house. In such a situation it is considered that an effective way of penalizing the man is to snatch away his property i.e., his wife. Unfortunately in India we have a unique situation of co-existence of all forms of violence, especially of elimination of women e.g. selective female foeticide, female infanticide, bride burning and sati. The women, right from the moment of stepping into the husband’s home tries to forget her own identity and adjust everything according to the needs of the new place and the people living in it. But the violence against women (like, dowry related harassment, death, marital rape, wife-battering, sexual abuse, deprivation of healthy food, female genital mutilation, etc) from the womb to the tomb continues.

Violence against women in India is a very big and serious Social issue which has taken its root deeply to the societal norms and economic dependence. This issue of violence against women comes forth time to time in the form of brutal gang-rape, sexual harassment

at work place, acid attack, etc. Brutal gang rape and murder of an 8-year old girl, Asifa Bano, in Rasana village near Kathua in Jammu province, on 10th of January in 2018 is a case in point. Perpetrators enjoying the backing of ruling party wanted to scare away her nomadic tribe from the land and they choose that innocent young girl as the target to send a message.

Violence against women happens because of inefficient legal justice system, weak rules of law and male dominated social and political structures. According to the research it is found that violence against women begins at home in the early age especially in the rural areas by the family members, relatives, neighbors, and friends. Time is the real eyewitness of all the sufferings (like sex discrimination, exploitation, oppression, aggression, degradation, humiliation, etc) borne by the helpless women. In the Vedas, women are glorified as mother means one who can create and nourish a life. On the other hand, they have found themselves suppressed and subjugated by the men in the patriarchal society. Violence against women can be domestic as well as public, physical, emotional or mental. Women have fear of violence in their mind which hampers their full participation in many areas of life.

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