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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement



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## **Conflict, Displacement and the ‘Lived Body’: A Phenomenological Reading of Selected Literary Narratives from Kashmir**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines selected literary narratives from Kashmir in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘lived body’ to understand how exile and displacement disrupt the embodied meaning. The primary texts for the study include short stories and memoirs based on the Kashmir conflict. Diverse narrative forms have been selected to understand how the disruption in the embodied meaning takes place differently. The paper contends that in the selected narratives, the body is more than the site of trauma. It is a vantage point from where perception ensues and meaning gets constituted. The paper draws insights from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “lived body” to understand how the body acts as a seminal site of perception and meaning and how trauma unsettles the stable embodied meaning, leading to perception marked by fragmented voices, silences, and profound corporeal alienation. The disruption of embodied

meaning reconceptualises the body-world relationship, producing an altered perception of time and space. Additionally, the paper studies literature, in general, as a space for reconstituting the idea of self in the wake of trauma induced by conflict and displacement. Writing about trauma and displacement can restore intersubjective ties that are fractured since an individual feels isolated in his loss on account of exile. Thus, literary narratives become spaces that enable shared memory. Through storytelling, grief is witnessed, becomes collective, and enters a common perceptual field, enabling recognition and the possibility of healing.

**Keywords:** *Conflict, Exile, Trauma, Phenomenology, Intersubjectivity, Lived-body*

## Introduction and Analysis

Kashmir has been the site of a long-standing, intense, and turbulent conflict in South Asia after India gained independence in 1947, which was shadowed by the partition of the country into two nations- India and Pakistan. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir merged with India, becoming a central point of contention between the two countries. The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir (earlier a state) has been the battleground where conflicting ideologies based on nationalism and religious identity have led to wars, insurgency, heavy militarization, leading to the erasure of any kind of stable political ideology, cultural fabric, harmony, and above all, individual identity. The conflict led to the exile and trauma of local Kashmiri pandits in the 1990s, on account of the place being a Muslim majority state, as Victoria Schofield writes, “In a mass exodus, at the beginning of March, about 140,000 Hindus left the valley for refugee camps outside Jammu. The more affluent took up residence in their second homes in Delhi, but the vast majority were housed in squalid tents in over fifty camps on the outskirts of both Jammu and Delhi. Their story is as familiar as any the world over. Displaced from their homes because of a war over which they had no control.”<sup>1</sup> For the ordinary Kashmiri, the conflict resulted in a struggle between state power and terrorism, resulting in trauma and violence for every stakeholder. The entities like home and identity, which could have

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<sup>1</sup> Schofield, Victoria., *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*, I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 151

had stable meaning for a common Kashmiri (Pandit or Muslim), became unstable categories marked by trauma, pain, and loss. The literature written against the backdrop of the Kashmir conflict portrays the desolation and disintegration of people's lives in myriad ways, thereby emerging both as a site of loss and of resilience. The literature produced against the backdrop of conflict provides valuable insights for a nuanced understanding of conflict and trauma, as Angelica R. Martinez & Richard E. Rubenstein write, "Narrative and literary works reveal the indelible marks that violence and conflict inscribe on those left in their wake."<sup>2</sup>

The history of Exile, violence, and trauma in the wake of the Kashmir conflict has been represented across different genres, ranging from novels, short stories, memoirs, testimonials, poetry, and documentaries, each exploring the conflict and its repercussions in its own artistic manner. Although substantial research has been done on the Kashmir conflict and its representation in literature, there is a lack of attention to the lived body as the site of trauma and perception in exile narratives from Kashmir. This paper attempts to address this gap by reading selected short stories and memoirs using the phenomenological method. Textual analysis has been employed to understand how exile disrupts embodied meaning. For the present study, three short stories from Siddhartha Gigoo's collection *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories* and three memoirs from *A Long Dream of Home*, an anthology of memoirs edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma, have been analyzed in light of the phenomenological concept of the lived body.

Phenomenology as a philosophical approach fundamentally studies how one understands the world through the lived experience rather than through any prior abstract notion, as Dermot Moran simplifies it in the book *Introduction to Phenomenology*:

*Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that*

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<sup>2</sup> Martinez, Angelica R., "The Truth of Fiction: Literature as a Source of Insight into Social Conflict and Its Resolution", *The International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution*, 4:2, 2016, pp. 208-223

*is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.*<sup>3</sup>

N.D. Ramalho et al compare phenomenology based on different thinkers and conclude that “while there is a multiplicity of ways of taxonomizing phenomenological currents, we divide them into: pure, existential, embodied, Jasperian, psychopathological, and critical.”<sup>4</sup> This research article utilizes the embodied aspect of phenomenology developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to analyze selected texts written against the backdrop of the Kashmir conflict. The paper also draws from Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, who in their book *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* have connected the phenomenological insights of the major philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty with mind and cognitive science, thereby expanding more on the body's central role in cognition and perception. Merleau-Ponty redefines Husserl's phenomenological method, which Husserl “conceived of as a science of the essential structures of pure consciousness with its own distinctive method.”<sup>5</sup> And emphasizes the role of embodiment in the phenomenological method. Dermot Moran writes, “In the 1930s, both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty saw phenomenology as a means of going beyond narrow empiricist, psychological assumptions about human existence, broadening the scope of philosophy to be about everything, to capture life as it is lived.”<sup>6</sup> While Husserl

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<sup>3</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 4

<sup>4</sup> Ramalho, N.D. et.al, “The Reductions in Phenomenology-A Comparison Across Main Authors”, *European Psychiatry*, 2024, p. 661

<sup>5</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 60

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5. Cf. Kumar, G., & Chadha, A., “Can ‘Ardhanarishvara’ resolve the Onto-logical Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa? A Study in Non-Binary Ontology and fluid identity in Indian metaphysics”, *Dianoesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 75–106. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41706>

focuses on the structures of consciousness, perception, and the process of meaning independent of bodily functions, Merleau-Ponty believes that consciousness functions through the active participation of the body and the body becomes the site of perception and meaning-making. Shaun Gallagher while elaborating the role of body in perceptual process writes:

*Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the lived body from the objective or physiological body. The latter is an object that finds its place among other objective entities in the world, in space and time. It is scientifically observed and analysed. It can be dissected into its various parts and each of these parts can be defined anatomically and physiologically as having specific place and function within the whole. The lived body, on the other hand, is the body experienced in a non-objective way. It is not the objective body seen by microscope or x-ray, but it is the body that sees or that exists in the act of seeing. If the objective body is that which can be perceived as an object, the lived body is that non-object involved in the perceptual process.*<sup>7</sup>

Dermont Moran also elaborates how Merleau-Ponty “extended Husserlian phenomenology in an existential direction, to take cognisance of our corporeal and historical situatedness.”<sup>8</sup> Patricia Moya in an opinion article titled “Habit and embodiment in Merleau-Ponty” writes

*According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no hard separation between bodily conduct and intelligent conduct; rather, there is a unity of behaviour that expresses the intentionality and hence the meaning this conduct. In habits, the body adapts to the intended meaning, this giving itself a form of embodied con-*

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<sup>7</sup> Gallagher, Shaun., “Lived Body and Environment”, *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 16, 1986, pp. 139-170.

<sup>8</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, pp.402.

*sciousness. Indeed, for our author, corporeal existence constitutes a third category that unifies and transcends the physiological and psychological.*<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Moya focusses on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between habitual body and actual body as delineated in the book *Phenomenology of Perception*. Moya focusses on how Merleau-Ponty talks about the "co-penetration" of the habitual body and the actual body and how sickness can cause a rupture between the two. The paper argues that in light of the trauma induced by exile there can be a similar dissonance between the actual body and the habitual body which is caused by any kind of sickness. In the case of displaced individuals, the habitual body carries memories in the form of gestures, actions, and familiarity of space while the actual body inhabits a space which is alien and unfamiliar. So the body does not behave naturally as was expected of it, based on the habits it carries, thereby creating a rupture between the habits the body has developed and the actual lived experience of it. The primary texts have been read in light of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and the paper contends that the characters' alienation and meaninglessness arises out of this dissonance. Siddhartha Gigoo's collection of short stories *A Fistful of Earth and other Stories* (2015) narrates the stories against the backdrop of war and political upheaval in Kashmir during 1990s. The stories explore the themes of exile, displacement and loss which appear both collective and individual. Each story depicts how the characters grapple with their sense of self. Gigoo has not directly referred to Kashmir in the stories but all the stories represent how the trauma of displacement has shaped the lives of the characters. In some stories, Gigoo embraces a linear temporal order and narrates the incidents realistically but elsewhere he blurs the line between reality and imagination and uses the technique of surrealism to explore the profounder recesses of human psyche. Through Gigoo's stories the paper delves into the very act of body bearing the pain of displacement, loss and cultural erasure. The degeneration of the body is a recurring motif across all the stories. The rejection of Cartesian dualism by Merleau-Ponty and Merleau-

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<sup>9</sup> Moya, Patricia., "Habit and embodiment in Merleau-Merleau-Ponty", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8:1, 2014, pp. 1-3

Ponty's idea of lived body is the basic premise of this paper. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of perception* defines body as not merely an object but as an entity which occupies a subjective space and engages with the outside world and contributes to the formation of perception. Merleau-Ponty while exploring the relationship between body and world draws an analogy where he compares body in the world with heart in the organism and infers the centrality of body in perception as he writes, "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty differentiates the biological/physiological body from the lived body in which he situates the perception of a human being. When Merleau-Ponty writes "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it"<sup>11</sup> he is trying to establish the idea that how body is not an external object to a human being but how it is the site where experience and selfhood converges lending depth to the human identity as body is the very foundation of life and human beings are actually their bodies since that is how they exist. Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing the embodied nature of human existence and consciousness by rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and establishing body as something which is not external to the idea of consciousness or "I" but a medium which constitutes the very idea of "I". Reading selected short stories from Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Fistful of Earth* in light of Merleau-Ponty's lived body can help one to understand how displacement is not tied only to its geographical meaning of losing a home but to the very essence of one's being i.e one's embodied connection with meaning. Once displacement takes place, embodied meaning loses ground as there is a disconnection between the body and the new space which it inhabits.

The second text for analysis is a book of memoirs titled *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma. Published by Bloomsbury in 2015, the book has been divided into four parts titled 'Nights of Terror,' 'Summers of Exile,' 'Days of Parting' and

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<sup>10</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 173.



‘Seasons of Longing.’ This anthology in four parts comprises of personal narratives by Kashmiri pandits who were the victims of the insurgency and terrorism in 1990s. The memoirs focus not only on the terrifying days and nights of displacement but also on the utter feeling of loss post displacement. The writers have focussed on the loss of home, the complex web of memories and how the body grapples with unfamiliar spaces after exile. As the title of each section depicts, the narratives unravel the nights of dread and uncertainty and the days of departure from one’s native places. The narratives of parting reveal the estrangement from neighbours, the transformation of friends into alien others and the collapse of everything that was once familiar. The memoirs of parting focus on how exile is existential and how what was once meaningful is severed on account of violence and trauma. Departing becomes an irreversible act which brings forth summers of scorching heat in an alien place and a life time of longing for home and familiarity. Selected memoirs have been considered for primary reading as the book contains accounts by thirty people across different generations and professions. In the memoirs, there is an intense focus on how body becomes the fundamental site of experiencing trauma and estrangement. The exiled body is navigating unpleasant new spaces which unsettle the sensory reality, shifting the surroundings from familiarity and warmth to hostility and distress.

In “Poison, Nectar” from the collection *A Fistful of Earth*, Gigoo delineates the story of a family of four living in a canvas tent in a makeshift camp during exile. The family includes Lalit and his wife in addition to his mother and ailing father. The story portrays the desolation of a displaced family in which the father is suffering from dementia and the story explores the relationship between body, space and identity. Gigoo reveals how the displacement is not merely geographical but existential too as the tent represents both a fractured extension of the demented body of the father and a rupture in the embodied meaning for everyone else since the harmony between the body and the space they used to occupy earlier is wrecked. This results into a new perception of reality in which Lalit’s mother is, throughout the day, either “wiping the sweat of the husband’s sore ridden body”<sup>12</sup> silently or “stitching

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<sup>12</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 42.

the torn fabric of her tented home with an old needle which had become her prized possession.”<sup>13</sup> The needle connects her past with the present as she had carried this needle with her during the exodus. The everyday routine which their bodies were familiar with have become empty and mechanical. The connection of Lalit’s mother to her husband and to the tent reveals alienation which is manifested in the silence and emptiness of her mechanical movement in the tent throughout the day. The mother’s gestures can lead us to the phenomenological understanding of exile in which she tries to suture not only the tent which houses her exiled body but also her fissured world of meaning. While Lalit’s father used to lie in his vegetative state, the daughter-in-law used to dream of his death and she would often “imagine the bed without her father-in-law.”<sup>14</sup> She used to have visions that the body of the father-in-law has been cremated by them but they “had not been able to discard the bed which occupied plenty of space in the tent.”<sup>15</sup> The father’s corporeal presence interferes with the embodied meaning which the daughter-in-law wants to establish with the tent as the tent doesn’t represent only a fracture in her sense of belonging but also represents a space which tries to inhabit her exiled body, thereby becoming a symbol of not only displacement but survival too. She imagined herself lying on the bed and sleeping peacefully”<sup>16</sup> when in reality “At times, she woke up in the middle of the night, took out a pocket mirror from her purse and looked fondly at her reflection. She stroked her furrowed brow tremulously whenever she looked into the mirror. She knew she had to make an effort to smile”<sup>17</sup>. The reflection which Lalit’s wife sees in the mirror is an alienated sense of herself and a representation of estrangement with her embodied self. The very attempt to wake up and see oneself in the mirror is an act of encountering the sense of self by looking at one’s body but for Lalit’s wife it becomes an act of seeing her displacement and loss, governed by the memory of her past, which she tries to defy by thinking of smiling and restoring her sense of embodied self. Dreams and memory play

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 45

important role in each character's sense of belongingness and the fractured identity is revealed through their respective bodies. Lalit dreams that "he had grown old and taken to the bed. Sores had erupted all over his body. His wife had turned into stone. She was glum and didn't know what to do. The four men entered the tent, reciting hymns and prayers. It was a strange dream."<sup>18</sup> This dream encompasses a sense of profound degeneration that displacement and trauma had brought forth for him and his family. The sores represent the decay and disintegration and the transformation of the wife into a stone represents the transformation of a bustling body into an inert entity. The relationship which Lalit shares with his wife is not one of warmth and intimacy. His dream, combined with the relationship which they are sharing can be read collectively as an instance of disconnection and estrangement which displacement can produce in an intimate relationship. Reading the behavioural aspects of Lalit and his family members in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's rejection of understanding the "pre-reflective awareness"<sup>19</sup> through Husserlian transcendental reflection can provide interesting arguments about how our comprehension of the world is fundamentally based in our corporeality. Dermont Moran elaborates that Merleau-Ponty talks about "examining breakdowns in the bodily circuit which bring to light routines and procedures which are hidden and assumed in our normal conscious state."<sup>20</sup> So what seems normal and smooth arrangement of body with the world is a much-nuanced mechanism if we delve into how it works. Merleau-Ponty attempts to do so by investigating pathological cases in which body's normal interaction with the world is fractured due to illness or disorder. Moran writes how Merleau-Ponty analyses case studies of brain-damaged war veterans (like Schneider) to understand their bodily movements and how the motor ability of the disabled person was operational but the person's body is unable to be operational in a fluid manner and the motor ability becomes more mechanical and is locked in one action repeatedly.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>19</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

<sup>20</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

When Merleau-Ponty elaborated on Husserl's intentionality "all consciousness is consciousness of something"<sup>22</sup>, Merleau-Ponty emphasized the relationship between intentionality and bodily movement and focussed on the body's consciousness of action. He talked about the motor intentionality stating that our primary means of consciousness is bodily action and the possibility of it rather than any kind of contemplative thought process. Displacement and trauma can interfere with body's natural intentionality. Lalit's dream about his sore ridden body and his wife's stasis can be read as an expression of the rupture and loss of intentionality. Lalit can see his own body and his wife's body no longer acting with the same ease as they used to, thus revealing a rupture in their experience of self. In literature focussing on exile, trauma and displacement, intentionality and its loss can be represented through the gestures and bodily movements of each character and the motor ability of each character in relation to their surroundings. Thus all the four characters of Gigoo's story "Poison, Nectar" can be read in light of Merleau-Ponty's lived body and intentionality as Ponty's theories can provide novel insights into each character's disintegration of embodied meaning caused by exile and displacement. According to Merleau-Ponty,

*"The constitution of a spatial level is simply one means of constituting an intergrated world: my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world (292)"*<sup>23</sup>

Trauma alters body of each character into "Schneider"<sup>24</sup> like bodies where the bodies are divested of their motor intentionality

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<sup>22</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, pp. xix.

<sup>23</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 292.

<sup>24</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419.

and the relationship between the body and the space collapses. In displacement, the bodies are unable to receive desired feedback from the environment and each body gets stuck in a frozen action. A fractured body-world relationship results into Lalit's inability to imagine a pleasant future. It leads his wife to see herself as a displaced object in the mirror unable to come to terms with her own image. And Lalit's mother is stuck in habitual actions devoid of meaning.

Loss of motor intentionality can be observed in "The Umbrella Man" too. "The Umbrella Man" by Siddhartha Gigoo is a story of an insane man living in an asylum after exile. The story is rather ambivalent as the umbrella man is named number 7 and he lives in a cell in an asylum. The story revolves around him and he seems to be stuck between the past and the present. The story opens with the lines "He unfurled the umbrella, held it aloft over his head and stepped out of his ward again that evening, thinking that it would rain."<sup>25</sup> The cell in which he lives seems to be a symbol of a constricted space his body inhabits. Although he is given the privilege to "saunter out of the gates and spend sometime in the street nearby"<sup>26</sup> but every time that ends either at one wall or the other. Gigoo writes "No one in the asylum remembered how the umbrella has become an inseparable companion of the man."<sup>27</sup> The umbrella had become an extension of his body seemingly looking for meaning. Gigoo writes "It was rain which defined the umbrella, gave it a purpose, its essence and meaning. The umbrella was utterly worthless without the rain."<sup>28</sup> The umbrella has been depicted as having a relation to someone dead and number 7 seems to carry it like a relic of the past. There is distortion of temporal order in his life and the only thing which helps him afford any kind of meaning is the umbrella. It's an agency which helps him to relate to the outside world. Whosoever he is talking to, rain and umbrella are the recurring motifs. The man's relation to the outside world is depicted through his corporeal actions and he is devoid of any temporal sense and his only meaning arrives through umbrella and waiting for rain. The man's past seems to have a

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<sup>25</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 174.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 176

deep connection with rain and umbrella, thus both symbolising a kind of freedom which the man is waiting for. Umbrella becomes a carrier of his past like the needle of that old lady in the story "Poison, Nectar." He often talks to an imaginary child who he thinks is dreaming an unpleasant dream. He would often say to the child that it is just a dream and "Go back to sleep. I am by your side."<sup>29</sup> Gigoo writes "For years, during his life in isolation in the asylum, the child never grew up. The man grew old. White strands of hair covered his face. He was left with little strength in his bones."<sup>30</sup> The man's relation and conversation with the child seems a kind of connection which his older self is trying to establish with the younger self. The body inhabits the memory of his past, and as the past life no longer exists he holds onto the objects and the corporeal actions to reconstitute something which has been lost but all he is left with are certain gestures suspended between his past and current lived reality. The repetitive gestures of the umbrella man exemplify a distortion in what Merleau-Ponty claims that the body is "geared into the world"<sup>31</sup> and the motor intentions are supposed to receive an anticipated response from the surroundings.<sup>32</sup> The habitual action of the umbrella man is intact but he has lost the intentional foundation of his gestures. Like Lalit's mother in "Poison Nectar" the umbrella man is holding on to the actions and gestures which his habitual body is unable to forget but the fluidity, purpose and intentional grounding of his gestures are absent which can be studied like the case of "Schneider, studied by Gelb and Goldstein"<sup>33</sup>, divulging that exile is not a only loss of home but a fissure in reciprocity between the body of a human being and the world.

"The incurable Madness of the Municipal commissioner" from Gigoo's *A Fistful of Earth* is a profoundly moving narrative of suffering, blending exile, loss, trauma and magical realism to reveal how psychological suffering is manifested and perceived through

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, pp.176.

<sup>31</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

body. With the sudden deterioration of the mental faculties of municipal commissioner he is relieved of his official duties but when a junior officer becomes curious about his illness the story reveals how memory's persistence sustains trauma and distorts perception. The commissioner inhabits an old dilapidated house in Nagbal which belongs to a Kashmiri Pandit named Madhusudan Bhat. The commissioner encounters the ghost of Madhusudan Bhat who used to live once in that house prior to the turmoil which Kashmir faced. He encounters the ghost without actually knowing that Madhusudan Bhat has long been dead and through his detailed meetings with that ghost Gigoo delineates how the commissioner absorbs the history and culture of the people who were living there once before they were forcibly exiled and commissioner's body becomes the space which absorbs all the history. So history haunts commissioner when he gets to know from Madhusudan's daughter that he has been dead for five years and always wanted to shoot a movie in their house which the commissioner has purchased. So each object including the walnut box of memories which the ghost hands over to commissioner becomes an embodiment of the history of that house. The story of the commissioner and the ghost is revealed through commissioner's diary which sheds light on the detailed encounter of the commissioner with the ghost of Madhusudan Bhat. On one night the commissioner enters that house and remarks "Last night I went to the village to see the house. The intruder welcomed me as though I was a guest."<sup>34</sup> The striking juxtaposition of the intruder and the guest underscores the grave irony of displacement as the actual owner of that house Madhusudan is reduced to intruder in his own home while the commissioner thinks he himself is the rightful owner of the house. Then commissioner begins talking about how the intruder started a ritual, "he took out a woollen cloak from his bag and put it on. He sat down cross legged in front of the fire he'd lit. He took out a handful of walnuts from his bag and placed them inside a brass vessel and then tied a garland of marigolds around the neck of the vessel. Then he poured water into the vessel and put candy into it. He folded his hands and recited a hymn in a language I didn't understand."<sup>35</sup> This ritual signifies how body carries the culture

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<sup>34</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

and memory of a community since this ritual is a celebration of the marriage of gods- Shiva and Parvati (Hindu mythology) practiced by Kashmiri Pandits. Gigoo blends spiritual, corporeal and magical elements to represent how Commissioner chances upon the history of the very individual who he thinks of as an intruder. Later when the commissioner gets to know he has seen the ghost rather than the actual person, the unity of his perception is lost and he fails to come to terms with the loss of history. The commissioner's behaviour can be read as the collapse of intentionality resulting out of the trauma and shock which he absorbs after knowing the truth. The Municipal commissioner's gesticulations as Gigoo writes, "were awkward and the expressions on his face could easily pass off as those of an actor. But for the clumsiness and his inane gestures, one would take him to be a perfectly sane person."<sup>36</sup> His almost theatrical expressions reveal as if he is performing rather than existing. His motor abilities have lost that pre-reflective fluidity of the body. His perception crumbles further as "There were times during the day when the commissioner demonstrated a seamy behaviour that bordered on the absurd. He would indulge in conversations with himself. At nights, he would sit still, frozen and petrified, and gape at the walls around him and utter, 'Are you dead or alive? Dead and alive are both one.' Then he would cover himself with a blanket and sleep."<sup>37</sup> His body transcends from movement to paralysis as it is unable to locate itself in a space of familiar history. The bouts of madness which commissioner is facing are not psychological only but his behaviour, gestures, occasional speech and repeated silence represent body's perception of memory and trauma. So, the madness is not mere cerebral but phenomenological.

The second text under review and analysis is a book of memoirs titled *A Long Dream of Home*. While introducing the book as something which marks twenty-five years of exile of Kashmiri Pandits, Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma write "The stories of the struggles and plights Kashmiri pandit exiles have remains untold. The old are fading away, taking away with them the untold stories-stories of who they were, what they faced, what they

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<sup>36</sup> Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



lost, how they struggled and what remains now.”<sup>38</sup> This exigency to preserve aligns with Paul Ricoeur’s argument that “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole story of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.”<sup>39</sup>

In the second part of the collection of memoirs titled “Summers of Exile”, the editors draw on Ovid’s and Victor Hugo’s reflections on exile. Ovid’s idea *Exilium mors est* (Exile is death) and Victor Hugo’s idea *Exilium vita est* (Exile is life)<sup>40</sup>, two profoundly contrasting positionalities on exile that contextualize what follows in this section. While the former focuses on the despairing identity and death of the self in the wake of exile, the latter focuses on renewal, resilience, and new viability of life but both capture the embodied existence of Exile. In the opening memoir “Summers of Exile” by Sushant Dhar, Dhar focuses on two spaces his family inhabited after being displaced from their original home in Kashmir- one was a “shabbily constructed room”<sup>41</sup> in a small town on the highway, and another was migrant quarters at Muthi in Jammu. While describing their experience in both spaces, Dhar focuses on how they encountered the new reality, and he delineates the torment as he writes, “The summer heat made our skin pale yellow. My parents shriveled.”<sup>42</sup> Dhar further elaborates how they were “bereft of the most basic things of life”<sup>43</sup> as he talks about the essential facilities like a toilet. He writes, “A dug-out was made to contain the feces. It all remained there, the feces, the dirty water and the urine in that little dug out area, feces over feces, water over water, all stagnated, emanating a foul stench.”<sup>44</sup>

While talking about his parents, Dhar talks about how they withered in “endless summers, inadequate spaces and the stifling heat...The nights and the cries of distress were never-ending. Our bodies were drenched in sweat all the time...the elders with ashen

<sup>38</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.xx.

<sup>39</sup> Ricoeur, Paul., *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 75

faces looked frazzled and wilted as if they were carrying a permanent burden on their shoulders. Elders were often seen loitering in the camp vicinity, expressing their longing through inane soliloquies and monologues.”<sup>45</sup> Sushant Dhar, while narrating the aftermath of displacement, encapsulates the displacement through the suffering body. He elucidates the experiences of the body through cramped spaces, faces rendered pale due to shock and horror, bodies soaked in sweat, and sunburnt faces. The aimless moving of the elders in the camp, their absurd monologues, represent the body’s disoriented action towards the world it encounters and the space it inhabits. Dhar further writes about the elders around him, “They were aging rapidly; many collapsed and died in the streets. The scorching heat was unbearable; many succumbed to sunstrokes and snakebites. Deaths became a daily affair in the camp. The migrants lived through this tumultuous journey, battling desolation, toiling day after day. The elders were the only connection to my native land. I longed to listen to the stories of the past, to connect to our native land. Their memories were what I depended on. I fear losing them all.”<sup>46</sup> Dhar’s account of the elderly people around him can be read in light of Ovid’s idea of “Exile is death”, both literally and metaphorically. While the body was suffering on account of heat and appalling living conditions, the death of the older people had become a regular course in the camp; the young people were dreading annihilation of their own past due to the death of the elders who carried the memory of their homeland and the story of their past. The death of the carriers of the past would be a disruption in the historicity of one’s identity. The young feared obliteration metaphorically as the possibility of identity reclamation became bleak for them in the wake of exile. The younger generation, which was born in camps or raised in camps, has nothing to fall back on, as the older generation, which carried the embodied meaning of the past, if dead, has nothing to pass on, and the upcoming generation will inherit incorporeal memories. The history of the culture or home is an embodied entity, and it is remembered through the body, and when the bodies that remember die, there is a collective death of history

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 77

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

for upcoming generations, which Sushant Dhar feared as an eight-year-old. Dhar repeatedly focuses on the penalties of exodus on children as he writes, “the children of exile had to bear the brunt of exodus,”<sup>47</sup> and he goes on explaining how children like him lived in those cramped spaces for fourteen long years and “shared space with insects, rats and cockroaches”<sup>48</sup>. There is a recurrent reference to toilets and the “horrible stench”<sup>49</sup> of the toilets, which, Dhar says, “made us curse our wretched lives. We were engulfed in a foul smell all the time.”<sup>50</sup> The repetitive use of olfactory sense is a powerful medium of understanding perception through the lived body. While the smell of rain connected the number 7 in *Umbrella Man* with his past, the draining foul stench in “Summers of Exile” signifies the traumatic degradation of living conditions that exile brings forth and symbolizes the absence of home in the dreariest way. The exiled/displaced body’s orientation towards the world becomes meaningless as the body inhabits spaces of filth, which is accumulating in a way that results in stagnation of decay and smell, literally as well as metaphorically.

Against the backdrop of incidents of 1989-1990 in Kashmir, Rattan Lal Shant’s memoir titled “Roses Shed Fragrance” focuses on his family’s experience of leaving their home and settling in another space. Shant, while writing about his connection with his home, keenly focuses on the family’s association with the flora that was native to their home. He mentions how his wife carried some rose saplings from Kashmir to Jammu and planted the saplings in the soil there. Shant’s wife attempts to preserve a part of her lost world by planting the saplings, thereby trying to retain a familiar sense of smell and sight. Shant, while describing his wife’s opinion, writes, “These saplings will remind us of our home. I pray that they never shed their petals and fragrance. In her heart of hearts, she was trying to reconcile herself to the fate and the misfortune which had befallen us.”<sup>51</sup> As Merleau-Ponty writes, “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside, and I am

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<sup>47</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.78.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>. Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.205

wholly outside myself.”<sup>52</sup> As a human being tries to establish a connection between the outside and the inside or subjective world, the perception ensues from there. The conception of self arises from the body's relation to the outside world, and the sensory attributes play a major role in it. Shant's wife, in planting the saplings, is trying to address the rupture caused by displacement. Rather than purely cerebral connection of self with meaning, body and the sensory perceptions contribute to meaning making. Thus, environment, sensory experience, and cognition are all interrelated to assign meaning to one's existence, and how sensory experience is one of the central premises to build a sense of belongingness with a place. Merleau-Ponty writes

*To perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance without which no appeal to memory is possible. To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting. To perceive is not to remember.*<sup>53</sup>

While the perception depends upon the body's placement in the space and has “Immanent significance”,<sup>54</sup> Memory is not a direct image of the past, which replays to trigger any kind of perception. Memory functions temporally to reconstitute the experience of the past for reclaiming meaning in its absence. Reading this and other similar memoirs can lead one to understand that roses and their fragrance are not just a stored mental image which can be recalled,

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<sup>52</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, pp. 474.

<sup>53</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

but something which Shant's wife attempts to reconstruct by immersing herself "deeply into the horizon of the past."<sup>55</sup> And reliving that temporally and how her memory is "rooted in the perceptual body."<sup>56</sup>

The first memoir of the last part of the book, *A Long Dream of Home*, titled "Seasons of Longing," narrated by Prithvi Nath Kabu and transcribed by Sushant Dhar and Siddhartha Gigoo, outlines Kabu as a witness to raiders who plundered Kashmir in October 1947 and his family's exile in 1991 after the insurgency of the 1990s. Kabu recounts how he spent his life after the exodus in a two-room flat in a migrant camp in Jammu. His son was killed by the terrorists, and his wife died after being bedridden for two years during exile. The testimony of Kabu is replete with emotional and sensory details as he delves into the appalling state in which he lived in exile. Kabu narrates how it has been painful for him to remember the days when militants killed his son, and his life could never been the same again. He recounts, "My health deteriorated. I didn't know what to do... twenty-five years have passed since I left Kashmir...Now I live alone in my two-room flat in this migrant camp at Muthi. I don't visit anybody, and nobody visits me. Sometimes I read. I try not to think about the past. But when I do, I have nobody to comfort me,"<sup>57</sup> Kabu further says, "My wife suffered a lot during her last years. She was bedridden for years. She couldn't bear the separation from her son and her homeland."<sup>58</sup> Kabu narrates the incident in which he is desperate about his wife cooking fish for him, and he delved into the familiar taste for a long time. While anticipating his death, Kabu narrates:

*I endure a lot of pain every day. I can't walk properly. My bones are weak. But somehow I manage to look after myself...I will limp. I will crawl. I will bear the pain. But I don't wish to be a burden on anyone. When I die, it will be difficult for people to take my body on their shoulders from the fourth floor of this building. I have made arrangements for that...I have kept a rope near my bedside. My neighbors can tie the rope around my legs and drag the*

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 240.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 241.

*body out. I don't care what is done to my body after I am gone. It's only a body. My well-wishers can either burn it or throw it in the river.*<sup>59</sup>

The subjective body is watching itself from outside, looking at it like a piece of flesh to be dragged using an agency that is not human but a mechanical article like a rope. Due to exile corporeal being begins to look at its own corporeality as something which is nothing more than flesh to be dragged mechanically after its death. While talking about collecting his son's body after he was murdered by terrorists, Kabu narrates his state, "I felt numb, as if somebody had smashed my head with a stone."<sup>60</sup> This signifies how the body becomes the medium of expression and perception and how sorrow is felt in the body. Rather than describing grief in abstract terms, Kabu uses a bodily metaphor and projects how his grief manifested itself through numbness and violence meted out by the body. Kabu ends the memoir with his desire to go back, as he relates, "I have only one desire now. I want to visit Varmul one last time before I die. I dream of the winters there! The summers, the autumns, and the springs! I want to visit my old house there. I want to drink the water from the spring and touch the soil there."<sup>61</sup> His yearning to go back is not simply a desire for a lost familiar space, but he longs to return to the lost lived experience. The memories of seasons, water, and earth, which he is recounting, are not abstract but embodied and settled in his habits.

Whereas we can witness a profound rupture in intersubjectivity in the selected literary narratives caused by exile and displacement, yet chronicling the stories of loss and trauma through writing initiates the gradual restoration of intersubjectivity. As per the phenomenological understanding, Intersubjectivity is the fundamental way in which humans live in a shared world, understand others as embodied beings, and comprehend how meaning is co-created in relation to the other and does not depend entirely on the isolation of a human being. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is embodied as he writes, "It is through my body that I understand

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>61</sup> Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 244-45

other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive things.”<sup>62</sup> Ponty underscores ‘lived body’ as the basis of both perception and intersubjectivity, while Husserlian intersubjectivity was transcendental, wrapped in ego, empathy, and consciousness.<sup>63</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “I am an intersubjective field”<sup>64</sup> underscores how subjectivity is not based in solipsism but is built in intersubjectivity, as we are already there in the shared world, as Merleau-Ponty writes.

*True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and situation, and through them, all the rest.*<sup>65</sup>

Dan Zahavi, too, asserts “Intersubjectivity, be it in the form of a concrete self-other relation, a socially structured life-world, or a transcendental principle of justification, is ascribed an absolutely central role by phenomenologists.”<sup>66</sup> Intersubjectivity entails that our subjectivity is based on the others’ response and perception of us. Trauma, however, due to exile and displacement, fractures the stable structure and challenges the very foundation of intersubjective associations. The body shrinks to isolation in forced exile. Across the selected narratives, it can be seen that there is a breakdown of bodily movements and thus intersubjective grounding. In “Poison Nectar,” the body of Lalit’s wife turns into an object for her husband in his dream and even for herself when she looks into the mirror. The intimacy that she used to share with her husband has collapsed as we can witness that in the first few pages of the story, only to be intervened with its restoration towards the

<sup>62</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 216.

<sup>63</sup> Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 409

<sup>64</sup> Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 525. Cf. Mitrou, Y., and C. T. Kolyri. “Philosophical Interpretations of the Image of Women as Performative Act of Gendered Body and As Bodily Orientation in space: M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Buttler - S. Ahmed - Deleuze”. *Dia-noe-sis*, 17, 2025, pp. 131-152, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41708>.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Dan Zahanvi, p. 157.

end of the story, when Lalit's father is about to die. The inability to remove the bed after the dead body of the father-in-law has been cremated interferes with the spatial and bodily freedom that Lalit's wife dreams of claiming. Likewise, in "The incurable madness of the Municipal commissioner," the commissioner's repetitive frozen gaze, the absurd words initially, and later the silence reflect his subjective identity retracting itself to isolation, as there is no reciprocity from the surroundings. His gestures appear as a performance like the umbrella man, whose repetitive action of opening the umbrella is rendered meaningless, driving him towards isolation. Prithvi Nath Kabu's thought that his neighbors can drag his dead body from the fourth floor of the building using a rope to avoid inconvenience signifies another phenomenological shift due to trauma and exile. His indifference towards his own corpse is the act of obliterating himself from the shared field of existence. Trauma collapses embodied communication and ruptures the meaningfulness of connection by isolating bodies into silence. Gigoo's despair regarding the death of the old people in exile and their fading into oblivion outlines how the loss doesn't simply amount to loss of people but of shared history, embodied habits, and cultural meaning. The narrative act of writing about exile and displacement can re-establish intersubjectivity. Thus, studying the selected narratives, especially the memoirs, in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's intersubjectivity and Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory can assist us in understanding the loss and reinstatement of intersubjectivity.

Both the narrative forms represent exile and trauma through their own artistic strategy. Siddhartha Gigoo's short stories capture the abrupt rupture in the embodied meaning by outlining the collapse of the gestures of the habitual body and motor intentionality. Both the narrative forms represent interference in the body-world dynamics caused by trauma and displacement. The memoir *Long Dream of Home* provides a reflective space in which the displaced individuals attempt to move back and forth in time and tend to recreate a continuity between the disrupted past and an alienated present. The memoirs can be read as important narratives of individuals who attempt to reinstate the shared perceptual field through narration. They invite witnessing through readership, acknowledgment, and reciprocation to transform something which is personal and isolated into collective and intersubjective. It can be



read as an attempt to move from forced isolation to recognition, materializing the reintegration of temporal disruption. Short stories underscore the fracture of the body's perceptual field while memoirs struggle to generate historical understanding and restoration of intersubjectivity. While Merleau-Ponty focuses on the lived body as the site of perception, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the act of storytelling as one of the essential agencies for establishing sense of self. Thus, both forms of literary texts can be valued as attempts to establish lost identity by using writing as an agency to reclaim some sort of belongingness in the wake of displacement and trauma.

### **Conclusion**

The preceding analysis reveals how selected literary narratives (short stories and memoirs), representing the forced exile of Kashmiri pandits, outline the trauma of displacement through the disruption of embodied meaning. The selected texts exemplify how forced exile and displacement can be understood through Merleau-Ponty's idea of the lived body and phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity. Displacement is not merely experienced as geographical dislocation but entails phenomenological rupture through the body. The texts reveal the collapse of the embodied meaning through sensory detailing focused on gestures, smell, seeing, and speech in what Merleau Ponty terms as, shared intersubjective field. The selected texts show how trauma reveals itself through the body in the form of repetitive actions, mechanical movements, absurd gestures, loss of sensory perception, and silence. The connection between the exiled body and the alien space it inhabits is rendered meaningless and is manifested in the immobile bodies and bodies ridden with a lack of fluid motor intentionality, in addition to the perpetual dreams about death, disease, and loss. The body in the texts can be read as the primary site of trauma, which ends up being a mechanical entity moving through the unfamiliar spaces. The selected texts represent how trauma resulting from exile can convert lively bodies into inert objects and shatter the idea of pre-reflective intersubjectivity and bodily reciprocity, breaking the circuit of meaning-making, thus isolating the individual.

Although the texts reveal a loss of embodied meaning but the selected narratives can be read as an agency through which inter-subjectivity can be gradually restored. The narratives can be read as an instance of shared meaning and history, which storytelling can repair. Memoirs reconstruct what has been disrupted by the exile, and one can witness the narrative capability of the memoir as it attempts to capture what Ricoeur calls “polysemy of action.”<sup>67</sup> By inviting readers to witness, identify, and participate, thereby restoring intersubjective ties. In addition to this, memoirs from *Long Dream of Home* enable historical continuity and transmission of collective experiences, bridging the fractures in temporality amidst loss and trauma.

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<sup>67</sup> Hengel, John., “Paul Ricoeur’s Oneself as Another and Practical Theology” *Theological Studies*, 55, 1994, pp. 458-480.

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